Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship:

Whanaungatanga mo te Aiotanga

Disengaged and dysregulated secondary school learners:

What approaches, strategies and practices are most effective and lead to increased engagement and educational success?

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Executive Summary

I am proud to be the principal of Glenview School, in Cannons Creek, Porirua. From 2018-2021 we underwent a journey of professional development, inquiry and transformation which led to a significant shift in the engagement, wellbeing and learning of our students. The training included a range of trauma-informed approaches and neuroscience teachings including Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model in Education (NME). Recorded behavioural incidents reduced from around 400 a year to none. With further NME training I went on to support other schools and educators around Aotearoa. I am now convinced that, with the right conditions and leadership, any primary school can follow a similar trauma-informed journey and shift their school culture and practice to one where 'dysregulated' (dangerous, disruptive) behaviour disappears.

However secondary schools are quite different. There are a number of variables which can make the journey towards improved engagement incredibly hard, especially for the most vulnerable and dysregulated learners. These factors include size, organisation, staff turnover, assessment pressures and the nature of adolescents with all the neurobiological, hormonal and social factors that this life stage brings.

I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom to explore best practice in relation to the approaches, strategies and practices which are most likely to support the most disengaged and dysregulated secondary school students and lead to their participation, wellbeing and educational success.

Methodology

I visited seven secondary schools, five Pupil Referral Units / Specialist Schools (Alternative Education), and a number of primary schools in mid and northern England and in Scotland. I met with groups of education professionals, including a number of Education Psychologists. I adopted a simple and informal research approach: in each conversation I asked participants:

What are the three most important factors, strategies or approaches which lead to the engagement and success of your most disengaged, disadvantaged and dysregulated students?

I collected a total of 28 responses from those who work in or with secondary schools. Sometimes each response represents an individual, usually the Head Teacher (Principal), other times the group collaborated to produce their top three factors.

Findings: What is most important?

1. Relationships.

28/28 responses mentioned relationships. They referred to the nature, quality and quantity of connection. This was not a surprising result as we have long known that the regular presence of a connected, trusted, nurturing adult is what all young people need to thrive (Bishop, R. & Berryman, M. (2009); Burke Harris, N (2018)).

Although there was a unified voice about the importance of relationships, the way that schools and centres organised their people and contexts to promote enhanced connection varied a great deal.

Schools and centres designed and structured their context to increase relational intensity and to provide a trusted adult for every child and/or to *break down the school into the smallest units* (of adult: student groupings) and *make their world small again*.

I saw, and heard about, schools where they take a well-organised, intentional and structured approach to ensure increased connection between adults and students and amongst students. For example, coaching groups which met 3 - 5 times a week, with all staff – including teachers, leaders, teacher aides, office and grounds staff being 'coaches' for a group of around 10 students from a range of year groups.

Most schools found different ways to break the large institution down into more intimate groups. Some places identified their most vulnerable and dysregulated students and ran a key-worker model where certain staff would meet with their assigned students 1:1 on a regular basis.

Some schools had managed to infuse a strong relational culture of care which was obvious on every level. At one school students would ask staff in the corridors how they were doing, or send them 'Happy Birthday' messages in the middle of the holidays, and the senior leaders would visit staff with care packages when they were sick.

One approach which supported the focus on relationships and pastoral care involved the recognition of the expertise and skill that many support staff bring: I was very interested to see how many of the high schools I visited had promoted non-teaching staff to positions of leadership in pastoral care and relational inclusion. It makes good sense that staff with the relevant skills and inclination in these areas should be recognised, remunerated and given a higher status than support staff currently receive in New Zealand.

Some of the schools visited had non-teaching staff in roles such as Head of Year or Assistant Head of Year, Pastoral Lead, or in the case of one large school a Senior Assistant Principal. Sometimes support staff were “Attendance and Welfare Officers”.

2. Staff Training: neuroscience-informed and trauma-aware.

The second most frequently referenced factor was staff training and the need for educators to develop understandings about behaviour. More than half the professionals spoken to identified this as crucial.

Professional learning and development took a range of forms and included: internal training, conferences or workshops provided by organisations such as The Attachment Research Community (ARC), Autism Education Trust, Multi-academy trusts, universities and private providers. Some staff had trained in Bruce Perry’s NME.

Often the educators leading the way in this work read widely and were influenced by writers such as: Kim Golding, Bruce Perry, Paul Dix, Dan Siegel, Nathan Maynard, Marie Gentles, Louise Bomber, Stephen Porges. Key concepts often referred to by British educators were attachment, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), stress, trauma, relational inclusion and “The Window of Tolerance”.

It is not until educators and school leaders understand some basic neuroscience about brain development, nervous systems and dysregulation that they will begin to change how they approach student behaviour, including how they interpret and manage their own levels of regulation. They will then appreciate why punitive behaviour management responses will be ineffective for many children.

3. Interesting, relevant and personalised Curriculum

The third factor spoken about by those interviewed was the importance of curriculum content and implementation that is relevant, purposeful and engaging for youth.

Programmes of learning needed to include personalised and interest-based curriculum content, some basic neuroscience, psychoeducation or emotion coaching and offer learners a strong sense of self-worth, self-appreciation and ideally provide opportunities for young people to contribute to others and to the community.

4. Adaptations and flexibility within school policy, organisation and practice while maintaining high expectations:

Educators spoken to often highlighted a paradox: a school should maintain consistent and high expectations while also allowing for flexibility when necessary.

Participants articulated that a school should have a clear expectations framework, such as a code of conduct and/or values foundation for students and staff. However,

when children fail to adhere to this code or disrupt relationships due to dysregulation, staff should respond with understanding and compassion, supporting students to make amends and restore relationships.

I discovered a number of other interesting approaches, models and initiatives, such as neurofeedback therapy, supervision for educators, the Virtual School Head framework to support children in state care and an initiative to support autistic youth. These are described in my report.

Recommendations:

In summary, educators, leaders and policy-makers in Aotearoa need to explore the following:

1. Organisation to enable more frequent opportunities for relational connection
2. Provision of appropriate and sustained staff training in relational neuroscience
3. Compassionate flexibility and adaptations to school (high) expectations for respectful personal interactions
4. Interesting, personalised curriculum that includes some psychoeducation
5. Consideration of ways to elevate the status of support staff to recognise those that have relational and pastoral expertise

Conclusion:

If all schools in Aotearoa prioritised connection and culturally-centred staff training in relational neuroscience, not only would the landscape of education be transformed, but social, health, mental health, and consequently economic outcomes across New Zealand would improve dramatically. Our schools need to be organised in a way that allows adolescent learners, especially the most dysregulated, to experience frequent, small doses of relational connection with trusted, neuroscience-aware adults.

"Relationships matter: the currency for systemic change was trust, and trust comes through forming healthy working relationships. People, not programs, change people."

Bruce D. Perry

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel and research and will be forever grateful to all those who generously gave their time, fostered the connections, shared their thoughts and offered their support to enable me to complete this project.

Thank you to the Winston Churchill Memorial Fund trustees for seeing the potential benefit of this kaupapa to education in Aotearoa New Zealand, and making the travel possible.

Ngā mihi maioha ki oku hoa-mahi o Te Kura i Glenview: acting principals and other staff who looked after the school in my absence and to the Board of Trustees for their support.

I want to particularly thank three educators, and new friends, who spent extra time hosting me and connecting me to a range of schools and education professionals across England and Scotland: Andrew Wright, Anthony Benedict and Lesley Taylor. I hope that I can do the same for you one day in New Zealand.

Introduction

Seven years ago I read a book called The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog by Bruce Perry (2017). It changed my life and it had a profound impact on our little school in Cannons Creek, Porirua. It is a collection of narratives of trauma and transformation: each chapter tells the story of a child or group of children who have experienced significant stress, trauma or neglect. Perry incorporates neuroscience teachings to illuminate what happened to the children's brains and nervous systems and describes his therapeutic responses.

At Glenview School we learnt much from completing a book study on Perry's work, often making the connections between the children in each chapter and the students we taught, and importantly, to ourselves. Our teaching team went on to complete The Neurosequential Model in Education (NME) Introduction Course. NME was developed for educators by Perry, Steve Graner and their team, formerly known as The Child Trauma Academy, and now as The Neurosequential Network. (https://www.neurosequential.com/). I later completed further certificates in NME Training.

Beginning in 2019 we began to make some changes to policy, practice and pedagogy in response to what we had learnt. With hindsight we can look back on the previous years and see that we had been a system in stress: several of our children came to Glenview in states of distress and dysregulation and we often responded influenced by our own dysregulated nervous system states.

The changes that we made were not particularly visible nor tangible; our curriculum changed very little. The shift primarily happened in the mindset of the adults who began to understand that the nature and effectiveness of children and adults' functioning depended on the state of their stress response system. When teachers noticed children becoming dysregulated they responded with strategies they knew would support regulation, such as breathwork, rhythmic activities or relational co-regulation. We introduced a morning Nurture Group, led by support staff, for a small number of the children.

The impact was incredible. Behavioural incidents recorded in a schoolwide journal reduced from approximately 400 in 2018 to 5 in 2022 and none in 2023. HIgh level incidents requiring physical restraint, class evacuation or internal school stand down shifted from 100 in 2018 to none in 2022 or 2023. We have no stand downs, suspensions or exclusions. Academic achievement began to improve and our student attendance and staff retention improved to higher than the national average for similar schools.

A number of accounts of Glenview School's journey towards trauma-informed education can be found in print and audio formats (Education Gazette, 2020; AASR, 2023; Ako 2024; Blackett, J, (In print)).

I completed further study and went on to provide training and Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for educators across Aotearoa. As time has gone on I have moved away from using *Trauma-informed* as the description for this kaupapa. The word trauma can

mean different things to different people and can have an emotional or triggering resonance for some. I now prefer to describe this work as *Relational Neuroscience.* Overtime I have understood more about how important it is for educators to have at least a basic understanding of the science about brains and nervous systems, and this science is all about how humans relate to each other and about the power of human connection to wound as well as to heal.

In 2023 I was extremely fortunate to be awarded both a principal sabbatical and a Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship. I remained committed to expanding my knowledge and teaching in the area of Relational Neuroscience as I considered a research focus. My journey with Glenview School and my work in NME means I am confident that, with the right support, training, and leadership, any primary school should be able to achieve similar shifts to reduce dysregulated behaviours and support the safe and positive engagement of all their learners.

However, it is a 'different ball game' when it comes to schools serving teenagers. Not only are our intermediates and high schools dealing with adolescents who bring with them traditional developmental and puberty- related challenges, but in recent years concerns about youth anxiety and mental health have reached extreme levels. In addition, most of our secondary schools, and many of our intermediates, are much larger institutions than most primary schools.

Always one for a new challenge, I settled on the following research focus:

What factors, practice and strategies lead to best practice and positive outcomes for disadvantaged, disengaged and dysregulated youth in the secondary school sector?

The terms 'disadvantaged' and 'disengaged' youth should need no explanation. The concept of 'dysregulation' is not so widely known or understood.

What is dysregulation?

Dysregulation is a term used increasingly in the education sectors of New Zealand, Australia, North America and the United Kingdom. It is much more appropriate and less deficit than terms like 'challenging' or 'unacceptable behaviour'. It accurately describes the phenomenon of a distressed nervous system, one that is not well-regulated. Many models or theories of brain function describe how stress or trauma dysregulate the lower parts of the brain, such as the brainstem and limbic system, and send the stress response system into a hyperarousal state of fight or flight or a hypoarousal state of freeze. It is not until these lower brain regions and related networks are well-regulated that a person has good capacity in their cortex. Prefrontal cortical capacity is needed for self-control, planning, problem-solving, decision-making, learning and a range of other higher order thinking skills. It is needed to behave appropriately at school and engage positively in learning.

What causes stress and dysregulation for students?

Diverse conditions of the central nervous system, particularly those related to the receiving, processing and integration of sensory information, may lead individuals to find certain environments distressing, both physiologically and emotionally.

Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events or ongoing unpredictable and significant stress are likely to have oversensitised stress response systems and endure intense experiences of dysregulated nervous systems. The stress may be due to the absence of responsive, attuned parenting and positive early attachment or to high levels of family and community stress, which may in turn be due to transgenerational trauma, poverty and related adversity.

It is no surprise therefore that the majority of young people suspended and excluded from school, involved in negative school behavioural incidents, disengaged and not attending school, represented in youth offending statistics or suffering from poor mental health are disabled youth and/or those that have suffered from childhood adversity, stress or trauma.

Dysregulation contributes to various forms of anxiety and poor mental health:

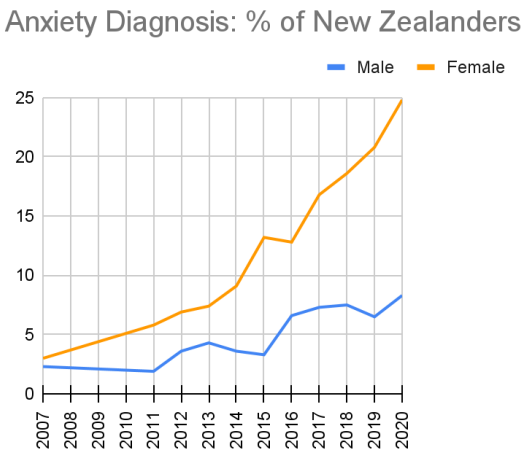
Dr Robert L. Leahy, Director of The American Institute for Cognitive Therapy wrote in How Big a Problem is Anxiety: *The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950's*. (2008).

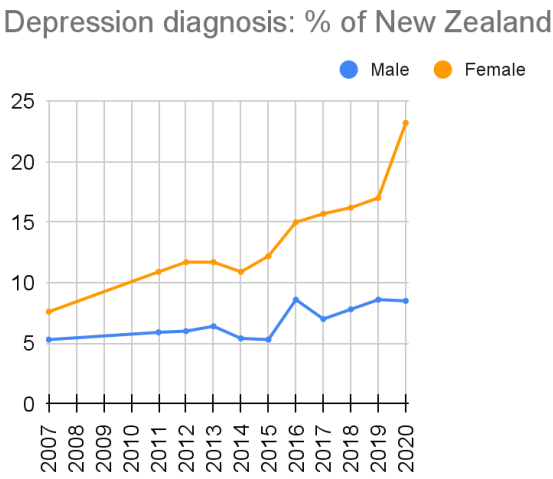
As we know, levels of anxiety and mental illness have increased dramatically in the sixteen years since Leahy made this statement, especially for youth.

In Aotearoa we are experiencing the global pandemic of teenage dysregulation as much as any nation: indeed our youth suicide rates are amongst the highest in the world, with Male and Māori disproportionately represented in the statistics. (MSD, 2016, Phillips, 2019, Sutcliffe et al, 2022).

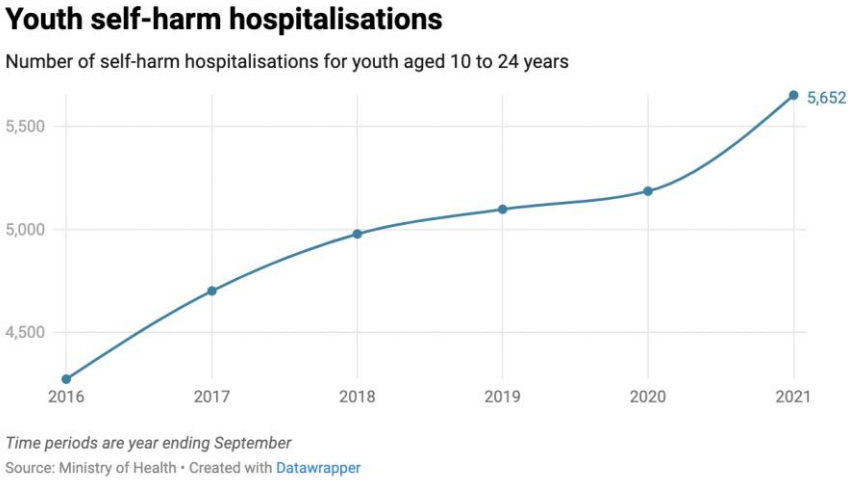
UNICEF reports that New Zealand's youth suicide rate is the second worst out of 41 OECD countries. UNICEF New Zealand Executive Director Vivien Maidaborn attributes this to a constellation of factors, *"such as colonisation, the bias of teachers in schools which exclude children, socio-economic background, poverty, cultural influences and inequality."* (UNICEF, 2020)

The following graphs illustrate some alarming youth mental health statistics in Aotearoa:





(Ministry of Health, 2020)



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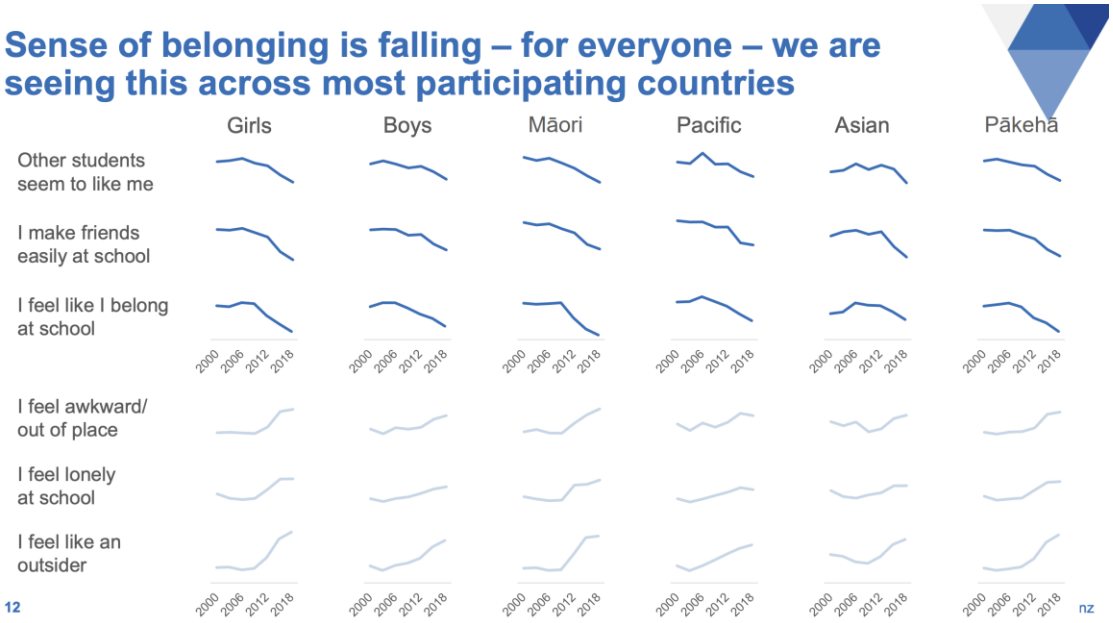


Ministry of Education, New Zealand report on PISA Data (2019)

Jonathan Haidt writes about the pandemic of youth anxiety and mental illness in his recent publication *The Anxious Generation* (2024). He describes a phenomenon that began in many Western countries in the mid 2010s and says it is no coincidence that the internet-connected Smartphone became popular a year or two before we see the sharpest increase in the anxiety statistics. Haidt attributes poor mental health outcomes for young people to the shift from a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood.

In Aotearoa we know that there is a significant correlation between extreme levels of teenage anxiety and current low school attendance levels. The Ministry of Education reports that in Term 1, 2024 38% of students were not attending school regularly. The number for secondary school students alone will be higher. If we consider this result next to the statistics of young people with diagnoses of anxiety, which is heading towards 30%, and add to this the percentage of students with undiagnosed anxiety: are we surprised that school attendance is so low? and are we addressing it in a way that is likely to be effective?

The UK government has recognised the phenomenon of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and uses the term to describe children and young people who experience challenges in attending school due to negative feelings and emotional and physiological distress. At a government, system-wide level I don't believe the UK has found the most effective solution either, however most of the schools I visited in England and Scotland were certainly on the right track.

Research in England and Scotland

I decided to travel to the United Kingdom as I had some NME contacts there. I had heard of The Attachment Research Community Trust (ARC) and I reached out to the Chair, Andrew Wright who was an amazing host for part of my time in England. Similarly I was recommended to contact Anthony Benedict in Tameside who kindly arranged a number of fabulous visits and hosted me for my time in the Manchester area.

I am very aware that the cultural landscapes of England and Scotland differ significantly from Aotearoa. To find exemplary practices for engaging and supporting Māori and Pacific students, we need only look to Kura Māori and schools deeply rooted in Pacific language and culture. Māori students in these Kura often achieve higher NCEA results than their peers in English-medium schools. For instance, Te Kura Māori o Ngā Tapuwae in Māngere outperformed all state schools in the 2023 NCEA results.

In English-medium schools, Kaupapa Māori education experts like Russell Bishop, Mere Berryman, Angus Macfarlane, Sonja Macfarlane, and others have long guided educators in better supporting rangatahi. Unfortunately, governments and policymakers do not always acknowledge their expertise or the positive outcomes their models and advice produce. I recall my time working for a government agency in the mid-2010s, feeling perplexed when the government of the day withdrew support for Te Kotahitanga despite strong evidence of its effectiveness in improving outcomes for Māori learners (Alton-Lee, 2015).

As a Pākehā educator, I am not best positioned to advise Māori or Pacific educators on best practices. However, I find it fascinating to observe the convergence and similarities when conversing with educators in very different environments. As described in *He Awa Whiria: Braiding the Knowledge Streams in Research, Policy, and Practice* (Macfarlane et al., 2024), the power lies where different approaches and bodies of knowledge intersect.

I was interested to visit Primary Schools who were implementing Trauma-informed and relationally inclusive theory, policy and practice. However, this was not my primary focus so these schools have not been included in this report.

After more than thirty conversations, with at least sixty education professionals, in many venues across the UK, I have collected the opinions of a wide range of professionals who work in, or with, schools in England and Scotland. Along with current educators and psychologists working in and with secondary schools, the group included a recently retired headteacher of multiple schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRU), an NME Advanced Trainer from Australia, a retired middle school teacher and former Director of NME and a University of Minnesota Professor/ NME Trainer, both from the United States.

Visit Schedule (The shaded venues below are places or people working in or with secondary schools and PRUs: Alternative Education provision).

1 May	Colebourne Primary School, Birmingham	Joseph Cash Primary School, Coventry	President Kennedy School, Coventry	Future Trust Learning Event (where I gave a presentation)
2 May	Travel	ARC Meeting		
3 May	St Patrick's Catholic School, Liverpool	The Belvedere Academy, Liverpool	Hope Special School, Liverpool	Liverpool Schools Network Session
7 May	Spen Valley Secondary School, Liversedge	Carr Manor Community School, Leeds		
8 May	Rise Carr College, Darlington			
9 May	Trauma Informed Attachment Aware Schools Roundtable Strategy Group Meeting			
10 May	Stirling Inclusion Support Service, Stirling, Scotland	Gathering of local Lead Education Psychologists and NME colleagues from Australia and the US.		
13 May	Clackmannanshire Local Authority, Scotland	Alloa Academy		
20 May	White Bridge College, Tameside	Silver Springs Primary School. Manchester	Hyde High School, Manchester	East Manchester Wellbeing/PSHE educators network meeting (Presentation)
21 May	Elmbridge School, Tameside	Great Academy, Ashton	Millbrook Primary School, East Manchester	Meade Hill School, Manchester
22 May	Emotionally Friendly Schools Conference, Manchester			
24 May	Brackensdale Spencer Academy, Derby			

My methodology was organic and informal. It most certainly lacked academic rigour but this meant I had the freedom to explore and pursue interesting lines of inquiry and be creative with design and documentation. I enjoyed rich conversations everywhere I went with education professionals passionate about engaging, supporting, including and teaching some of the most distressed or disengaged young people in England and Scotland. Being free of the constraints and requirements of an academic institution also gave me so much more time to focus on 'the important stuff'.

Following my visits I sat down to collate the responses and synthesise the key themes. To make sense for myself I recorded the identified "Top 3" factors on a grid. (See Appendix 1) As much as I try to move away from simple, black and white categorising measures I find I am always drawn back to quantifying my data as part of the sense-making process.

When asked "What are the three factors, strategies or principles that you believe, or have seen, best support disengaged, dysregulated or disadvantaged secondary students and lead to successful outcomes?" One hundred percent of the education professionals identified relationships in their top three, and most described it as the most important factor. The quality and quantity of relational human connection was implemented and realised in a number of different ways.

The other key factors most frequently identified were:

- staff training- to better understand behaviour, engagement, attachment and the brain
- an interesting, personalised and purposeful curriculum, and
- the ability to have flexibility and adaptations to policy, practice and curriculum when children need it.

1. Connection

Connections on the outside form connections on the inside

Becky Bailey (2011)

Without exception all the education professionals spoken to identified relationships as an essential factor leading to effective support and positive outcomes for the most disengaged, disadvantaged and dysregulated youth in the secondary school sector.They referred to the nature, quality and quantity of connection.

Although there was a unified voice about the importance of relationships, the way that schools and centres organised their people and contexts to promote enhanced connection varied a great deal.

Schools and centres designed and structured their context to increase relational intensity and to provide a trusted adult for every child and/or to *break down the school into the smallest units* (of adult: student groupings).

In 2020 the British RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce) put out a report called Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions. The report identifies relationships as the key to preventing school exclusion and references the Education Endowment Foundation (A charity established in 2011 to improve the educational outcomes of the most disadvantaged pupils in English schools).

"This notion is supported by guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on how to reduce poor behaviour in schools, in which the authors recommend that "every pupil should have a supportive relationship with a member of school staff" explaining that "there is a strong evidence base that teacher-pupil relationships are key to good pupil behaviour and that these relationships can affect pupil effort and academic attainment". (RSA, 2020)

When I read statements such as the one below from the Pinball Kids report I am reminded that I was fortunate to visit some of the most successful schools in the UK in relation to support for vulnerable youth. My three key contacts chose schools for me to visit that they considered were examples of good practice.

"Interviewees for this project reported that it is particularly difficult for secondary school teachers to build strong relationships as they have less time with each pupil and substantial reporting requirements. For example, youth worker Luke Billingham described in an interview with the RSA that, unfortunately, resource-strapped public services like schools are having to become "more transactional, because being relational takes time". Difficulties in building relationships are no doubt also exacerbated by high staff turnover in the teaching profession, which limits the opportunities for pupils to get to know a teacher well and build trust in them."(RSA, 2020)

The following are examples of some of the ways schools organised for, and promoted, increased connections for learners:

Carr Manor Community School in Leeds is a Year 1 - 13 school with a roll of around 1,250. Students attend from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and communities; many of them are English Language Learners and there are higher levels of students with special educational needs, and students eligible for free school meals (EFFSM), than the national average.

Carr Manor takes a well organised, intentional and structured approach to ensure increased connection between adults and students and amongst students. All staff – including teachers, leaders, teacher aides, office and grounds staff are 'coaches' for a group of around 10 students from a range of year groups. Coaching groups meet three times a week with a 'check in' on Monday mornings about their weekend and what is coming up in the week, a mid-week 'check-up', and a Friday afternoon 'check out' to review the week. Coaching takes place in circles to encourage student participation. The vertical 'whānau' grouping approach supports peer mentoring with older students supporting and role-modelling for younger students.

Teachers and leaders at Carr Manor talked about the need to "break the school down into its smallest units" and ensure that "every child has a trusted adult in the school". Involving leadership and all non-teaching staff ensured that the coaching groups could be small with usually just 10 pupils. They had well-considered processes and staff training to support their school value of *Know our children well*. This knowledge and connection with students begins before they start at the secondary school level. Students have either come through the Carr Manor primary classes and/or experience a thorough transition process into Year 7. Staff spoke of at least three planned transition meetings with students and their families called "Meet Your Coach" days.

Not only were all staff trained in the coaching model but they received internal and external training in restorative practice, trauma-informed practice, attachment theory, neurodivergent learners and emotional coaching.

Alongside a relational and restorative approach, a culture of high expectations was promoted, both for academic learning and for respectful interactions. Leaders expect staff to provide both *high challenge and high support*. Staff were expected to engage *professional curiosity* when faced with dysregulated student behaviours.

“The leadership at Carr Manor Community School note that the coaching approach has taken some time to embed but they believe that the rewards have been worth it. They attribute rising attendance and falling exclusions to this approach”. (RSA, 2020)

At **President Kennedy School** leaders articulated the importance of breaking the organisation of people down into smaller groups than you’d see in the traditional secondary school model.

President Kennedy is a large Year 7-13 school in Coventry with a roll of 1780. It reflects the diversity of the West Midlands with 55% non-white pupils and 30% who are eligible for free school meals (EFFSM).

Leaders recognise the importance of relationships for connection and inclusion and believe staff must *Connect before you correct*. The organisational approach taken at President Kennedy is to *create schools within the school.* Each year group is called a “college” and is led by a Director, a Progress Leader (academic / teaching) and a Pastoral Leader (non-teaching). Staff described this model as *cutting lines of accountability* and ensuring that *the college wraps around the child*.

Leaders spoke about the relational focus and trauma-informed approach now being part of the fabric of the school and its culture. It was a key priority for new staff appointments and for staff training. The school had created a Wellbeing Team to focus on staff wellbeing as this was recognised as essential to student wellbeing, inclusion and success. *The relational approach and shared language support staff with their own regulation*.

“*The caring nature and positive relationships between pupils of all ages, and staff is what makes this school such a special place to be. Pupils behave impeccably and live up to the high expectations that the school has. There are excellent relationships between staff and pupils.*” Ofsted Report, 2023.

The Belvedere Academy is a Year 7-11 school for girls in Liverpool. It has a multi-cultural roll and 22% of students are EFFSM.

Belvedere prioritises relationships for its most disengaged or dysregulated students with a Key Worker approach. 30-40 girls are identified by staff as likely to benefit from the increased connections that the Key Worker (KW) model provides. Staff opt in to be KWs, occasionally a student may request a particular staff member. The KWs develop strong relationships with the parents of their students, sometimes ringing them each day. The KW system ensures that these target students feel safe and connected to at least one trusted adult at school. The school has developed a student support area in the school where students can go if they are feeling overwhelmed, dysregulated or unsafe. This is an area where the target students can go if their KW is not available.

In 2021 **Spen Valley High School** replaced its Behaviour Policy with a Relationships Policy. The school's commitment to relational inclusion and attachment aware practice is evident at every level of its operation.

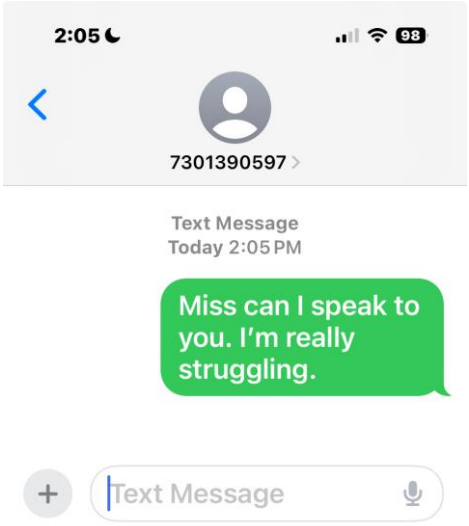
Spen Valley is a co-educational school for students in Years 7-13 in Liversedge, West Yorkshire, not far from Liverpool. It has around 1000 students with 27% EFFSM and 29% who qualify for 'Pupil Premium' support - an equity funding measure which includes young people in state care.

Spen Valley's relational approach clearly starts at the top with the principal's focus on connection with students, families and staff. Staff wellbeing is a priority and teachers spoke about leaders who went the extra mile, for example visiting their homes with support at times of personal challenge, illness or during lockdown, or checking in by text when teachers' children were unwell. The school has systemic provision for relational strength with strategies such as:

- The Relationship Policy
- The Wellbeing Centre which includes counselling available for students and staff
- The Snug (Sensory Room) with its resident pastoral support worker and therapy animals

- A text messaging service (discrete from staffers' personal text services) where students could make contact with their key adults.
- Daily Breakfast Club
- Coaching: groups of up to 16 where students check in with their key adult on a daily basis

However, it is obvious when walking through the school that values of attachment and relationships are realised and enacted by all. Staff constantly greet all students and students reciprocate by asking adults how they are, sometimes inquiring before staff have initiated the conversation. Mutual respect and genuine care are clearly part of the fabric of the organisation.

	The principal spoke of the close relationships between staff and their coaching groups. The dedicated text service supports the connections and student wellbeing, for example with texts such as this one. Another student knew that her coach's birthday was on 2 January, in the middle of the school break: the coach noticed that she had received a text at 12.01am on the day wishing her Happy Birthday.

Outcomes:

In an external report found on the West Yorkshire Trauma-informed 2030 website the impact of the move to a relational, attachment aware approach at Spen Valley is described:

- Improved quality of teaching, leading to improved student engagement
- Significant reduction in the number of student removals from lessons and in the number of detentions and fixed term exclusions
- Improved staff retention (2020/21 saw the lowest number of staff leaving in 9 years)
- Improved student academic outcomes
- Improved staff/student relationships

- Improved student feedback (See below)

It was very clear that all the students spoken to feel safe in school, trust adults and can name the staff, including the safeguarding leads, they would go to if they, or their friends needed advice and support. They said that the staff are 'good' and always 'friendly'.

One group of Year 10 students were able to reflect on the improvements they have seen in behaviour over their time at the school. Previously, the school was 'shouty' and that there used to be a lot of pushing and shoving in corridors. Students reported that they felt the behaviour was 'good' and that there was little disruption seen in their lessons. (West Yorkshire Trauma Informed: Spen Valley Report, 2022)

Alloa Academy in Scotland has a roll of 760 and serves an area of Clackmannanshire with high levels of disadvantage. Like the schools above, it has a strong culture of care and connection.

Led by the leader of the Additional Support Needs team, Alloa Academy have set up a Support Hub. This caters for a small group of students (5-6 at any one time) who are not likely to cope in the mainstream. Staff here understand that for these children *the academic focus needs to be put to the side* while strong relationships are built with students and their families. Staff will do home visits until family members feel comfortable coming into the school *for a cuppa*. The lead teacher has been trained in the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME) as has the Local Authority Lead Educational Psychologist who supports her. Much of the work with the children and their families includes a focus on learning about the neuroscience of emotions and regulation.

The relational, attachment-aware approach employed in the Support Hub has seen great outcomes for some of the most dysregulated students in Alloa. Attendance has risen by 30%. The previous year group attending the hub are now successfully all integrated back in mainstream classes. The hub lead told the story of a youth who had been involved in ongoing offending in the community which meant he had a number of Police 'Vulnerable Person Database' (VPD) disclosures recorded in the system. After six months in the hub the rate of his VPDs had halved.

There is a calm and supportive learning environment throughout the school, built on strong and mutually respectful relationships between staff and young people. Young people are polite, attentive and ready to learn. • There is a very nurturing ethos, with care for each individual young person. This includes a strong commitment to support young people who are care experienced. Learners and their families have a strong sense of belonging in the school. (Education Scotland Inspection 2024)

All the schools I visited prioritised relationships: the design and implementation for this looked different, largely according to where they were on their journey as a trauma-informed and attachment-aware organisation.

The Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Schools for children with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) all had much lower adult: student ratios to support increased connection.

At White Bridge College PRU leaders had prioritised staff wellbeing and relationships so that the adults were well placed to establish and maintain positive and co-regulating connections with students. As with a number of schools visited, staff at White Bridge participated in morning check-ins for a short time each day.

The format at White Bridge was:

1. Warm up or icebreaker. For example humorous questions such as: *If you were a car, what car would you be?*
2. Check in: Each staff member is asked: *Where is your window of tolerance today?* This meant leaders and colleagues could offer extra support if need be.
3. Breath work together.

One current and one former executive headteacher of Pupil Referral Units and SEND schools in Manchester are in the process of establishing a Multi-academy Trust (network of charter schools) that will have 'Relational Inclusion' as a non-negotiable priority focus across all participating schools.

Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love: Perry (2017)

The voices of these international educators resonate with the voices of Kaupapa Māori academics and educators in Aotearoa (such as: Bishop & Berryman, 2009; McFarlane, 2004), my previous research (2015), my experiences, and the work of education and neuroscience leaders around the world (E.g. Bruce Perry, Lori Desaultels, Mona Delahooke, Stephen Porges): Relationships are of utmost importance in our education settings.

As Perry and others have taught us:

Humans have a neurobiological need to be in community with other humans and to feel that we belong to the group. Our nervous systems need to physiologically and psychologically sense safety. This sensation is not necessarily rational: our bodies need to experience a felt sense of safety. Students need trusted and nurturing adults to

provide the conditions for felt safety. It is not until lower parts of the brain are regulated and feel safe in relationships that students can access the prefrontal cortex for successful learning.

Some children have not had many experiences of 'healthy' relationships: for whatever reason their primary caregiver has not been able to provide attentive, attuned, responsive caregiving. These children need to experience a new template for how humans should interact with one another. They need to have positive social competencies modelled and taught to them and they need many opportunities for co-regulation when they are dysregulated.

In addition, positive relationships motivate students to learn: positive feedback, be it a smile, a gesture or comment, triggers the reward networks in our brains which release dopamine. This helps a well-regulated student feel good and they are more likely to want to seek this connection and related feedback again. However, it should be noted that a dysregulated child, or one that has not grown up in a context of positive relationships, may not be motivated by relational, 'reward' feedback in the same way.

We can strengthen a student's resilience with the right doses of good stress and novelty, within the context of a trusted relationship.

Children and young people who demonstrate anti-social or stressed behaviours, anxiety or other mental health conditions which are an expression of a dysregulated nervous system, will heal most effectively from many, repeated experiences of connection, sometimes these only need be moments long. This 'therapy' may be more effective than traditional forms of therapy for youth with mental health challenges, such as irregular sessions with a professional that they do not know, in an unfamiliar context.

"Our major finding is that your history of relational health—your connectedness to family, community, and culture—is more predictive of your mental health than your history of adversity. This is similar to the findings of other researchers looking at the power of positive relationships on health. Connectedness has the power to counterbalance adversity."

Bruce Perry in What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing (2021)

2. Staff Training

The second factor most frequently referenced by educators was staff training and the need for educators to develop understandings about behaviour. More than half the professionals identified this as crucial.

Professional learning and development that school and centre staff engaged in included:

- Internal training sessions and workshops led by school staff
- Training and workshops provided by associated organisations such as ARC or a multi-academy trust
- External offerings, eg. workshops or courses on Emotional Coaching, The Thrive Approach, Trauma-informed Schools UK, Emotionally Friendly Schools. Some staff or Education Psychologists had trained in Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model in Education (NME).
- Training run by Virtual School Heads (eg. The HEARTs Approach in Liverpool), Local Authority Educational Psychologists (eg. Ready to Learn in Clackmannanshire) or external therapists or psychologists.
- University programmes, eg. PG Cert in Attachment, Trauma and Mental Health (Birmingham Newman University)
- Training from specialist providers such as the Autism Education Trust

Often the educators leading the way in this work read widely and were influenced by writers such as...

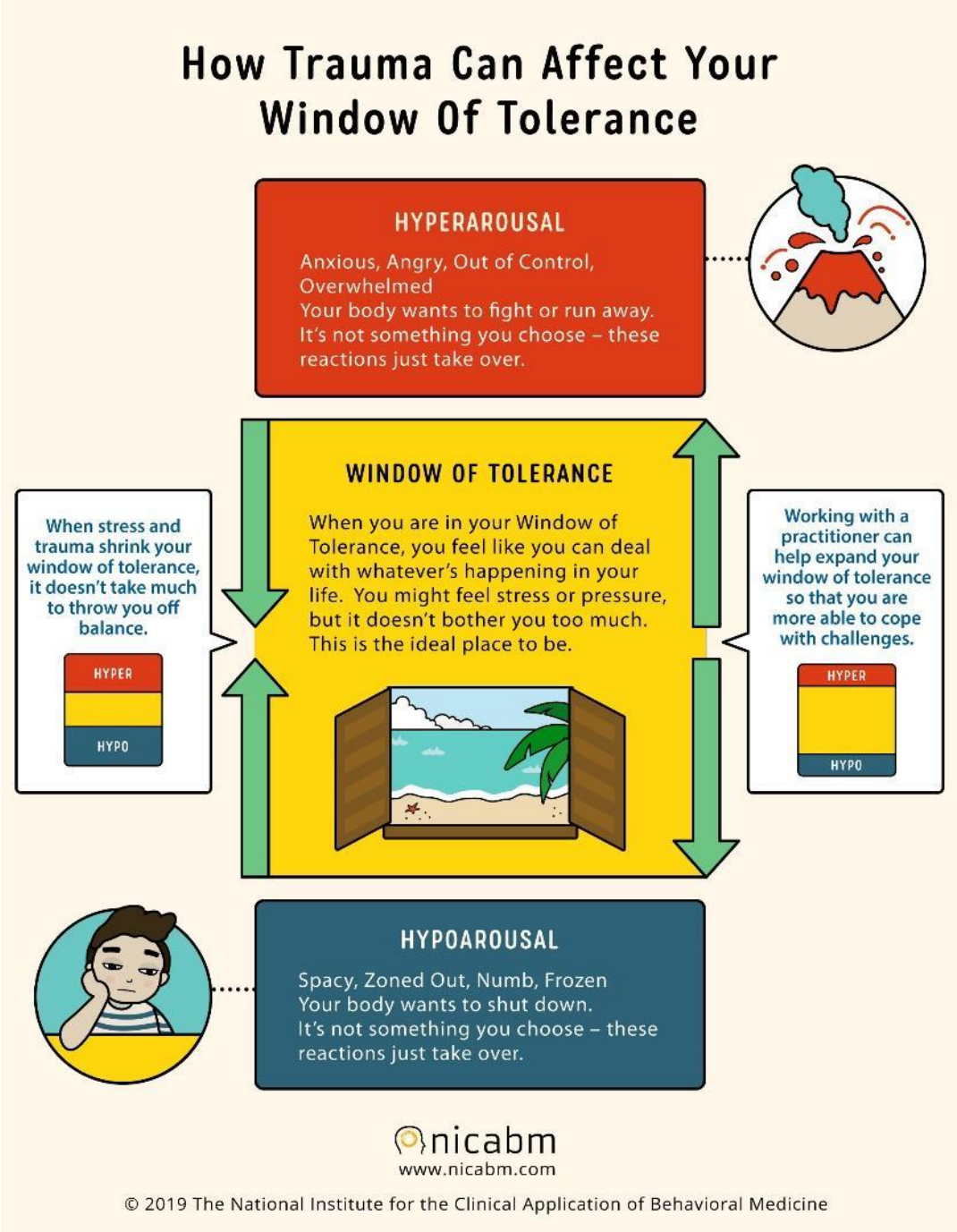
Kim Golding, Bruce Perry, Paul Dix, Dan Siegel, Nathan Maynard, Marie Gentles, Louise Bomber, Stephen Porges.

Why is Professional Learning So Important?

Professional learning in some basic neuroscience related to stress, trauma, and brain development is often the missing link in the professional advice, training, and programmes aimed at improving behaviour and student engagement. Existing initiatives to support teachers to respond effectively to dysregulated student behaviour, typically promoted and funded by governments and sometimes supported by academics, could greatly benefit from incorporating some simple science.

While the research is still limited, early evidence from Aotearoa indicates that teaching teams who invest in trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed training are seeing positive outcomes, including calmer classrooms and fewer disruptive behaviours. (Education Gazette, 2020, 2023; Ako, 2024; Māori TV, 2024; School News 2022).

Distressed or violent behaviours often stem from dysregulated nervous systems in both children and adults. High levels of stress or trauma, including physiological discomfort, can push human nervous systems into states of hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (freeze or dissociation). Many British educators referred to the "Window of Tolerance" concept, introduced by Dan Siegel, to describe these stress response systems.



The Head teacher of Spen Valley School is quoted discussing staff training in this report from the Rees Centre, Oxford University:
https://www.aati-reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/school/spen-valley-high-school/

Key concepts to include in relational neuroscience training for educators should include:

Oversensitised Stress Response Systems:

According to Bruce Perry, sensory information first enters the lower parts of the brain (brainstem, diencephalon, limbic system) where it is initially processed before being sent to the cortex for higher-level thinking and reasoning. When in a hyperarousal or hypoarousal state, these lower brain regions are dysregulated, affecting behaviour and rational thought. Individuals with over-sensitised stress response systems, due to past trauma or stress, are more prone to dysregulation and have greater difficulty achieving a regulated state.

Neuroception, a term coined by Stephen Porges, describes how our nervous systems continually assess our environment for threats. Neuroception is the neural process of scanning for threat or danger. Most educators can recall a student who comes through the school gate, or enters the classroom, at the start of the day in an activated state, already scanning their environment for danger. These children are easily triggered by the slightest thing, sometimes we can't tell what that trigger is.

Co-regulation and Self-regulation

"Forget the self-regulation emphasis: Emphasise co-regulation. Co-regulation enables the developing child to experience trust and safety. (They can then) use the memories and visualisations to self-regulate". Stephen Porges

(Video interview with Porges (early 2024). Reference not found: See the following pieces which explain the same concept: Baird (2024), Gobbel (2018).

In Aotearoa and around the world there has been a growing interest in social and emotional curricula and emotion coaching. Programmes and strategies to teach self-regulation are ubiquitous (eg. Zones of Regulation, Pause Breathe Smile, Let's Get Regulated (UK) and numerous resources on websites like Twinkl (UK) and Sparklers (NZ).

However, as we learn about the science that underpins stress, trauma and regulation we discover that it is even more important for educators to understand co-regulation. As Porges says, a child will need many, many experiences of co-regulation with a safe, trusted adult before they can effectively and consistently use strategies to self-regulate.

Bruce Perry teaches us that people with over-sensitised stress response systems will often need "bottom-up" regulation before they can successfully employ "top-down" regulation. In other words, somatosensory regulation that calms the lower areas of the brain (for example with rhythmic activities, breathwork or massage) will often be needed before any self-regulation experiences that require cortical thought or self-control.

Emotional Contagion

"Human beings are social creatures… so much of our neurobiology is influenced by the physiology and neurobiology of the people around us". – Bruce Perry

In the 1990s, Italian scientists discovered 'mirror neurons', which fire in the brain when we perform an action or observe another person performing the same action. These neurons fire simultaneously when humans are engaged in an act of doing something together or when they are observing the same action being performed by another person. This explains why a dysregulated teacher can dysregulate a student, and why a regulated adult is essential to help a dysregulated young person regain composure.

All the schools and centres I visited in England and Scotland had provided some form of professional learning for staff in trauma-informed, attachment-aware practice, emotional coaching and/or neuroscience. More than half of the education professionals I met with identified staff training as a priority for success. They talked about staff learning about, and deepening their understandings, of behaviour, emotion and regulation.

They spoke about educators needing to be curious about the causes and nature of students' dysregulated behaviours.

Our staff understand that behaviour is often a form of communication.

Teachers need to understand more about the intensity and complexity of some behaviours.

They have learnt to understand more about regulation.

It is important that adults can model healthy relationships, behaviour and the articulation of feelings.

Staff need to have an understanding of the Window of Tolerance.

Educators who understand the neuroscience connected to children, learning and behaviour: I've never met a child who didn't want to learn.

What makes a difference? … Staff training, support and understanding. They need the right attitude.

Leaders spoke of recruitment processes where they looked for staff with inclusive attitudes and understandings of relational practice. One school principal spoke about

asking applicants to rewrite their application letters to encourage them to bring out this commitment. : *They must be onboard with Relational Inclusion*.

Several professionals spoke about the importance of having *Unconditional Positive Regard* for all students. This term, coined by psychologists Standal and Rogers in the 1950s is often used by trauma-aware, inclusive educators who place the rights and wellbeing of the student at the centre of decision-making, policy and practice, regardless of the behaviours or attitudes they present with or the disruption they may appear to create.

Many spoke about the importance of staff understanding their own emotions and regulation. Some spoke about the importance of staff having a shared language and culture of trust so that they could communicate to one another, and to students, when they were feeling stressed or dysregulated. One teacher spoke about making a joke about these issues to help staff to communicate: *My Window of Tolerance is closing fast*.
Amongst our staff team at Glenview, we found it useful to keep it simple and just use the terms *Red Brain* and *Green Brain*: sometimes also making humorous references to these brain states.

Neurosequential Model in Education:

The Neurosequential Model in Education (NME) is an educational approach which supports teachers, leaders, and often children and young people, to learn more about brain development and function. It explores the impact that developmental trauma can have on children and young people, their behaviour and learning; it helps practitioners to understand human brains, relationships and nervous system processes. NME gives both staff and young people tools to use in order to encourage self-regulation and in turn achieve success both in education and in life in general.

Several Educational Psychologists and teachers I visited in Scotland have trained in NME. It underpins and informs their practice, helps them to know and understand each learner and respond effectively to their needs.

There are a growing number of educators across Aotearoa who are trained in NME, and a small number of people who have the NME Advanced Trainer Certificate which enables them to train others.

NME training has had a significant impact on the understanding and practice of many New Zealand teachers and leaders and we are starting to see the impact on student outcomes, particularly in areas of Wellington and the Hawkes Bay. (Education Gazette 2020, School News, 2022).

Key components of Effective Staff Training

In order for professional development to contribute to positive outcomes for students it became clear that key factors of the training were:

1. **Comprehensive** professional learning: not just one or two workshops on the topic to "tick the box": people mocked the approach where schools might say: we did a workshop so now we are "trauma-informed". School leaders spoke about the need to provide whole-school training, including support staff, office and grounds staff and others.
2. Training that is **linked to, and located in practice**, and allows for flexible implementation. Some schools met regularly for internal sessions, with some meeting weekly.
3. **School-based champions**. Some schools had selected staff who had extra training from external professionals and then led further internal staff development.
4. **Collaborative learning**: staff enjoyed learning together and some spoke very enthusiastically about inservice training days where different schools or networks came together to learn.
5. Training that included a strong **focus on the adults** understanding their own stress and emotional regulation, along with recognition of the importance of staff wellbeing.
6. **Sustained:** Schools were beginning to find ways to sustain the training, both to keep the school wide focus current and to induct new staff.

In New Zealand we need to prioritise preservice and inservice training that helps teachers to understand and respond effectively to students' distressed and dysregulated behaviours. Training in basic neuroscience, particularly concerning brain development and nervous systems, will enable educators to better understand their own brain functioning, stress response systems, and regulation. When teachers grasp the concepts of dysregulation and co-regulation and are equipped to teach students about brain functions and self-regulation, we can expect to see calmer classrooms and more effective, high-functioning schools.

The third (equal) factors that educators identified to support disengaged and dysregulated students were related to the curriculum provision and the flexibility of a school to provide adaptations to practice, policy and organisation when necessary.

3. Interesting, relevant and personalised curriculum

Educators, academics and psychologists all spoke about the importance of curriculum content and implementation that is relevant, purposeful and engaging for youth.

Some of the most globally respected and experienced leaders in the field of youth engagement talked about how important it was to ensure that programmes of learning are developed which offer learners a strong sense of self-worth, self-appreciation and provide opportunities for young people to contribute to others and to the community.

Ellen Froustis is a doctoral candidate at Oxford University completing a thesis on the psychological empowerment of vulnerable young people through community work and service learning: *Learning to serve and serving to learn*.

Ellen shared that we can combat social issues through education if we engage and mentor youth in projects of social change and community work: *When they learn to advocate for social justice issues in prosocial ways they will not need to do it in anti-social ways. We have abandoned our young people and their message is quite clear through their graffiti, bullying, rioting and growing crime*.

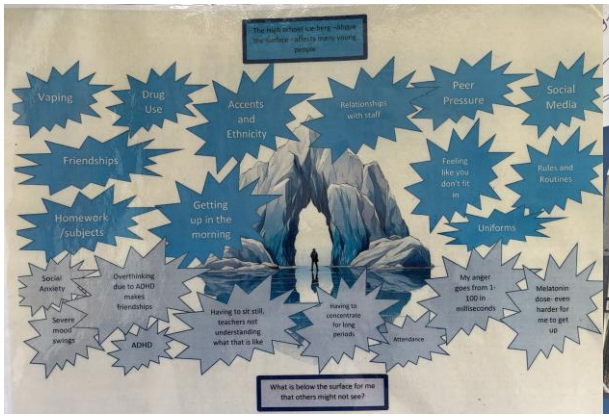
Ellen is also Executive Director of EIMAI: Centre for Emerging Young Leaders and is involved with an organisation called PeaceJam which has partnered with Noble Peace Prize Laureates to provide curricula, projects, events and global initiatives which focus on supporting youth to engage in their communities, receive mentoring, including from social justice leaders and role-models. PeaceJam has developed a *Compassion in Action* Curriculum.

An Education Lead Psychologist in Scotland referenced *A Curriculum of Hope* by Deborah Kidd. In this book, which is subtitled *As rich in Humanity as in Knowledge,* the author explores *the ways in which schools can create units of work that are both knowledge- and humanity-rich, and challenges the view that the role of children is simply to listen and learn - instead advocating their active engagement with local and global issues*. (Kidd, 2020)

Throughout the UK I saw good examples of personalised and interest-based curriculum content, such as engineering, mechanics, art, sports, workforce preparation, animal care, hairdressing and watersports.

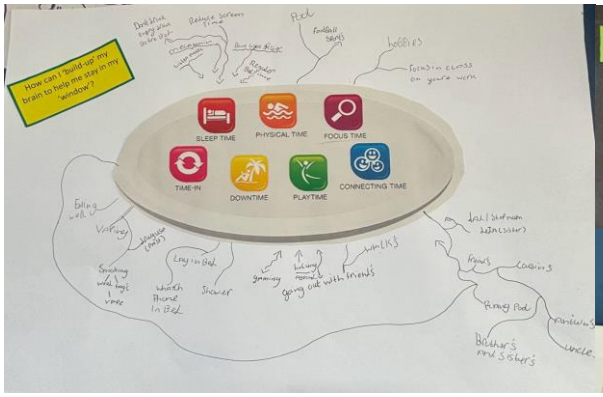
Fortunately, young people are very interested in their own brains and nervous systems. I saw many good examples of psychoeducation, neuroscience and emotional coaching within classroom programmes.

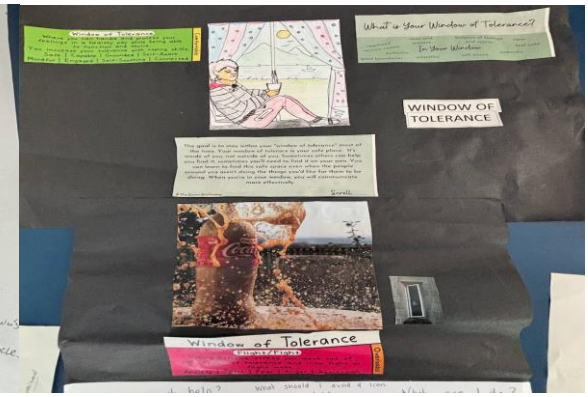
In an alternative education centre which is part of the Stirling Inclusion Support Service in Scotland, a student's wonderful curriculum project was shared with me. These images chart the student's learning journey as she explored her emotions, triggers, 'Window of Tolerance' and plan for recovery and regulation.



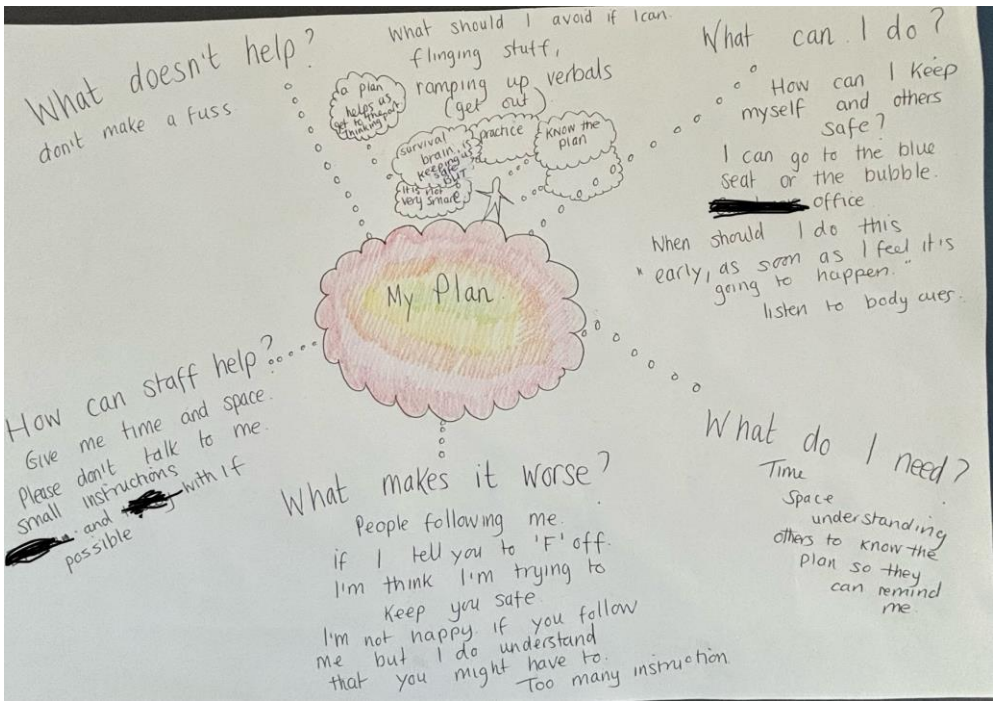
1. The Highschool Iceberg

2. Exploring my Windows of Tolerance





3. How can I build up my brain to help me stay in my Window of Tolerance? 4. Window of Tolerance



4. My plan

This student is learning about her brain and emotions and is supported to explore agency and self-advocacy for support.

Circles of Learning:

At Meade Hill College, a Pupil Referral Unit in Manchester, I was fortunate to observe a lesson that was part of the school's Circle for Learning programme. This is similar to the Roots of Empathy programme(https://rootsofempathy.org/) but not necessarily informed by it. One of the teachers brought her three year old daughter to some of the lessons and photos were taken of the child in her interactions with her mother and with others. Follow up lessons involved the students and teacher analysing the photos and discussing what was going on emotionally for the child. Students were then supported to make connections to their own emotional states, regulation and empathy. A key aspect of the programme was some basic neuroscience teaching about emotions, attachment and relationships.

Programmes which promote self-worth and self-understanding:

Steve Graner is a NME Director Emeritus and remains a NME Consultant. He taught for many years at the Middle School (Years 7-9) level. His contribution to the conversation held with professionals in Scotland was immensely valuable. When discussing priorities to engage vulnerable youth he spoke of the importance of programmes which foster self-understanding, self-appreciation and reflection: *Teenagers don't know themselves. When they understand the brain:body systems they begin to see their own uniqueness.*

4. Adaptations and flexibility within school policy, organisation and practice while maintaining high expectations:

Educators spoken to often highlighted a paradox: a school should maintain consistent and high expectations while also allowing for flexibility when necessary.

My interpretation of this within a New Zealand context: a school should uphold high expectations grounded in a framework of mutual respect, or manaaki, among students and adults. Any breaches in relationships or respect should be addressed and repaired appropriately. These expectations should be rooted in Te Ao Māori concepts and values, or aligned with Pacific or other cultural frameworks where appropriate.

A school should have a clear expectations framework, such as a code of conduct for students and staff. However, when children fail to adhere to this code or disrupt relationships due to dysregulation, staff should respond with understanding and compassion, supporting students in making amends and restoring relationships.

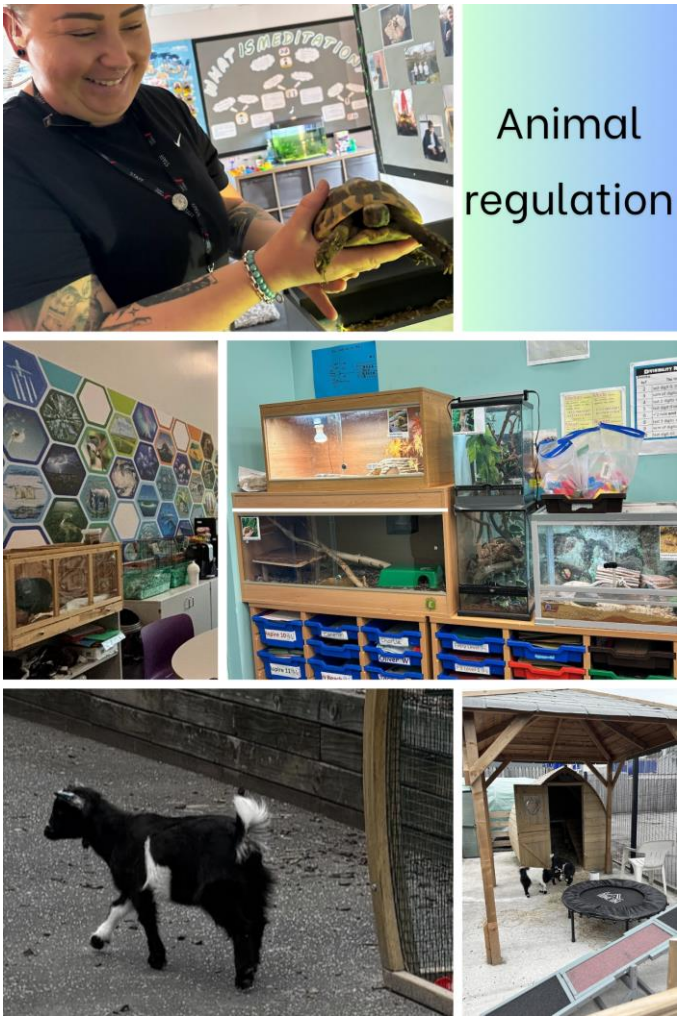
If staff are aware of nervous system sensitivities they can make accommodations, adaptations and widen their own 'window of tolerance'. For instance, it is good to see that the New Zealand Minister of Education is allowing exemptions to the cell phone ban in schools. However, the decision whether to allow students their phones rests with the school leadership. Some students may lack the support needed to advocate for their use of phones to enhance engagement, learning, and well-being. For example, a child with autism who is overwhelmed by aural stimulation may benefit from wearing noise-canceling headphones and listening to white noise on their phone. Similarly, a young person from a background of stress and trauma may need specific rhythmic music to regulate their stress response, though this need may be less well understood.

Adaptations to school practices, 'rules' and curriculum, seen in the schools visited included:

- A student's ability to access a key worker or trusted adult when needed to support their regulation. Several schools had regular key worker time built into the timetable, from three to five times per week

- Supportive wrap-around, scaffolded transition into secondary school for Year 7, for example*The Bridge* space and programme at President Kennedy School

- A reduced timetable for some students



- Animals for therapeutic and regulation support (even snakes!!)

- Scaffolded and transitional entry or reentry to school for students with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). For example, a converted van sat outside White Bridge College and was the first stop for students reluctant or unable to enter the school. Once comfortable working with staff and a very small group of students in the van they could transition to a supportive, dedicated space inside the school before moving into the main part of the school when ready.

- Calming and low stimulation spaces with regulation supports and other adaptations to suit sensory needs (for example fidgets, weighted blankets, headphones etc)

- Inclusion of more frequent movement and regulatory breaks within school programmes. (For example, the RISE program led by the Head of Physical Education at The Belvedere Academy).

Other interesting initiatives and observations:

School audits

It appears increasingly common for schools to take part in an "audit" or evaluation to determine their Relational Inclusion, Trauma-informed or Attachment- aware understandings and practice. This generally takes the form of a leadership and/or staff survey and sometimes a student questionnaire to determine areas of good practice and areas that may need development.

There are various different audit models and tools, including those developed by:

The Attachment Research Community: https://the-arc.org.uk/our-mission-and-approach

Emotionally Friendly Settings:
https://www.emotionallyfriendly.co.uk/

The Anna Freud Foundation:
https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/

Relational Inclusion: Tameside Pupil Referral Service / Your Place Therapy Relational Inclusion school audit.

Supervision for leaders and staff

Several of the school leaders spoken to found ways to provide supervision to their staff (similar to supervision provided to clinicians, social workers and others). They recognised that working in schools, particularly in the more economically disadvantaged communities, meant that staff frequently experienced secondary trauma. There was also recognition that steps to improve staff wellbeing would support positive outcomes for students. Sometimes the supervision was only as needed or once a term and sometimes this was group supervision. Some leaders used their 'pupil equity' money to fund this.

Neurofeedback

I was fascinated by the Neurofeedback programme at Meade Hill School and very lucky to have the opportunity to observe a session.

Neurofeedback therapy is a type of biofeedback which apparently can change the way the brain responds to certain stimuli and teach people to self-regulate their brain activity. It is a noninvasive technique.

Students choose from a selection of video games and sometimes YouTube clips. The technology monitors the student's brainwaves as they play the game or watch the video and provides real-time feedback on brain function. It picks up when they are distracted and lose their focus: at which point the sound or visual effects in the game or video change so that they are less rewarding. For example, if the student's attention wanders the game may lose its colour or the sound on the video will become muffled.

The theory is that over time, students learn to identify when their brains enter specific states. This awareness allows them to intentionally recreate calmer, more focussed states. They can more easily move into relaxation, or avoid harmful states, such as agitation, in their everyday lives.

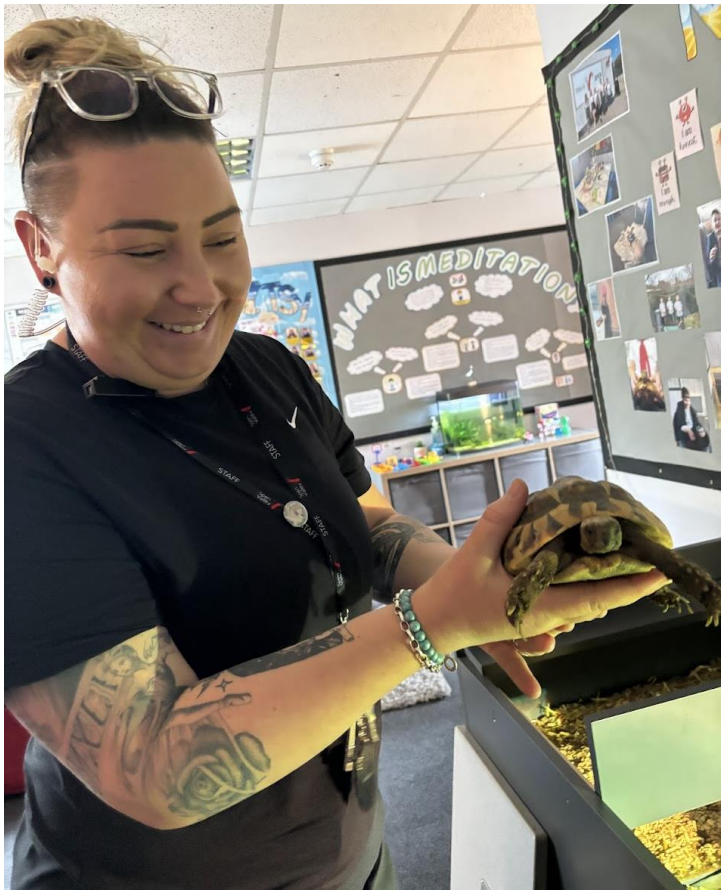
Staff report that this technique has had an impact on the participating students' levels of dysregulation and engagement at school. They say that parents have commented that their children are noticeably calmer at home.

Raising the status of support staff in pastoral care roles

I was very interested to see how many of the high schools I visited had promoted support staff to positions of leadership in pastoral care and relational inclusion. It makes good sense that staff with the relevant skills and inclination in these areas should be recognised, remunerated and given a higher status than support staff currently receive in New Zealand.

Some of the schools visited had non-teaching staff in roles such as Head of Year or Assistant Head of Year, Pastoral Lead, or in the case of one large school a Senior Assistant Principal. Sometimes support staff were "Attendance and Welfare Officers".

Relationships have been highlighted as the overarching priority to support youth to engage positively in education. We therefore need to shift some of our priorities in schools in Aotearoa and identify, support, train and recognise staff who are naturally skilled and committed to appropriate connections and pastoral care for students. Often these people will be non-teaching, of the community or share the ethnic culture of the children. We need to value these employees with status and associated income.



Virtual School Heads

"Looked after children" is a term used in the United Kingdom to describe children and youth who are in the legal care of the Local Authority (state). All Local Authorities (LAs) in England and many in Scotland have a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT).

Nowadays we associate the term Virtual School with online learning. However, in the UK this term refers to the people with strategic oversight and responsibility to support the improvement of educational experiences and outcomes for current and previous looked-after children and care experienced youth.

The VSHT roles and responsibilities vary somewhat across different LAs in England and Scotland but they often include:

- tracking and monitoring the progress, including attendance and engagement of care-experienced students
- providing advice, training and PLD to school staff
- liaison and work with other LAs
- championing the needs of care-experienced students
- oversight and evaluation of student plans

The National Association of Virtual School Heads provides training and support for VSHTs in England. It works with partner organisations and commissions research.

From my conversations and visits it was clear that the network of VSHTs was a powerful vehicle for sharing trauma-informed and attachment-aware training and best practice with educators. The New Zealand Government should explore the model if policy-makers are serious about improving the education experiences and outcomes for care-experienced tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa.

https://navsh.org.uk/

https://www.celcis.org/our-work/key-areas/education/virtual-school-head-teachers

Spectrum gaming: support for autistic youth

In Bury, Manchester I attended the Emotionally Friendly Schools Conference and there I was privileged to hear and meet Andy Smith from Spectrum Gaming. Andy is an autistic young man who founded Spectrum Gaming which is an online community for autistic youth to connect, and take part in gaming and other events. *"Alongside running an online community, the charity also hosts in-person socials and supports young people and their families by providing resources, signposting to other charities and working with other organisations to advocate for autistic people."* (https://www.spectrumgaming.net/)

Andy talked about autistic burnout that many young people experience when attending school. He said that around 40% of neurodivergent youth have difficulty attending

school regularly and for about 40% of those teenagers this is likely to be due to 'autistic burnout'. Huge energy is needed by autistic students to mask and fit in. It can be exhausting to constantly process memories and experiences. However, sometimes it becomes too much: they will be overwhelmed by the processing, energy and sensations and they will suddenly stop managing, or virtually freeze or drop out of school. Andy strongly believes that sometimes autistic youth just need a break, a rest, time to process difficult things. He thought that graded exposure, such as gradual transition back to school, won't necessarily help. Andy articulated the following as being helpful for many autistic youth experiencing overwhelm, mental health challenges and school avoidance:

- talking to a trusted person
- taking breaks and time to process
- talking and connecting to others through gaming
- physical activity outside the family
- mindfulness ''done the right way'
- self-understanding and self-compassion.

Spectrum Gaming has a linked site called *Autism Understood* which provides resources for young people and adults to learn more about autism and effective support for autistic youth.

https://autismunderstood.co.uk/

Recommendations

In summary, my recommendations to educators, leaders, and policymakers across Aotearoa are to build on what Kaupapa Māori research and practice has taught us: the importance of connection between rangatahi and trusted adults, whānau, culture, and place. We need to explore the following:

1. Organisation to enable more frequent opportunities for relational connection
2. Provision of appropriate and sustained staff training in relational neuroscience
3. Compassionate flexibility and adaptations to (high) expectations for respectful, personal interactions
4. Interesting, personalised curriculum that includes some psychoeducation
5. Consideration of ways to elevate the status of support staff to recognise those that have relational and pastoral expertise

If all schools in Aotearoa prioritised connection and culturally-centred staff training in relational neuroscience, not only would the landscape of education be transformed, but social, health, mental health, and consequently economic outcomes across New Zealand would also improve dramatically. Our schools need to be organised in ways that allow adolescent learners, especially the most dysregulated, to experience frequent, small doses of relational connection with trusted adults.

Indigenous wisdom tells us that connection is essential. International neuroscience tells us that connection is essential. Education professionals from various international jurisdictions tell us that connection is essential.

There are numerous ways schools can be structured to facilitate these daily connections. Schools should have the flexibility to implement these structures, but the effectiveness of any organisational model should be regularly evaluated, incorporating authentic student feedback.

My own experience, along with insights from education professionals in England, Scotland, the United States, and Australia, indicates that staff training in trauma-informed practice, brain development, relational inclusion, and attachment theory: essentially, educational neuroscience, leads to a range of improved school outcomes.

One positive outcome of this type of training is that leaders, and ideally governance representatives, will understand the need for flexibility and adaptations to schoolwide rules and expectations based on individual needs and levels of potential dysregulation. While school expectations can be high, especially regarding interpersonal interactions, they must also be compassionate and inclusive.

If professional learning is comprehensive, practice-based, informed by recognised neuroscience experts, and sustained over time, schools will see:

- Improved student mental health
- Increased student participation and engagement
- Elimination or significant reduction in serious or violent behaviour

- High levels of student inclusion

As a result, our secondary schools will produce:

- Improved attendance and academic results
- Increased staff retention
- Happier young people

Conclusion

Imagine the impact on our wider society if students with backgrounds of adversity and students with dysregulated nervous systems were supported to engage and remain in education. Imagine if they could complete school with a sense of accomplishment and self-worth and with good understanding about mental health and emotional regulation. They would transition out of school well-connected to peers, whānau, community and culture and ready to contribute to society in positive ways. We would see a reduction in a range of negative social and health outcomes including the school to prison pipeline.

Our current New Zealand Government has made some early policy shifts towards what they call “teaching the basics brilliantly” and “the science of learning” . If we want all young people in Aotearoa to succeed in school, with not just “the basics” but throughout the curriculum, then we must support our educators to understand and implement some deeper “science of learning” - science of engagement, connection, wellbeing and behaviour.

If you want to improve the world, start by making people feel safer. - Stephen Porges

The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love. - Bruce D. Perry

Let us together build communities … in which our children and youth, especially those who are most troubled can belong. - Nelson Mandela

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Data gathering: The UK Experience

(Needs to be read in 'landscape' for better formatting/text size etc)

What are the three most important factors, strategies or approaches which lead to the engagement and success of your most disengaged, disadvantaged and dysregulated students, including neurodivergent students?

	Relationships (Eg. strong connections, at least one safe, trusted adult, regular check-ins)	Knowing Learners/ Families well	Sense of belonging	Values: strong touchstone and realisation	'Trauma - informed' Training & Understandings	Psychoeducation Eg. Emotion Coaching, Neuroscience etc (Students)	Staff Wellbeing Eg. supervision	Interesting Curriculum	Leadership Knowledge & Understanding *	Adaptations Eg. Consistent and high expectations but differentiated or flexible when necessary	Safe or low stim space	Self esteem	High Expectns	Financial Infrastructure	Felt safety
CPS															
JCPS	"Consistent compassion"														
PKS	Schools within school Connect before Correct Relational approach among adults														

SP CP S	“Love ”				Curiosity about behaviour										
TB A	Key Workers														
HS															
HE AR TS LF	“Power of a hug”				Behaviour = Form of communication Adults model relationships, behaviour, feelings Understanding the intensity and complexity of some behaviours Understand regulation							Ch feel validated in the system to be who they are emotionally			Understandneed for felt safety (Psych)
SV SS	&families &staff Good communication on many levels Coaching group				Unconditional Positive Regard			Relevant Bring in relationships Scaffolded		Adaptations within curriculum					

	s / text service														
CM CS	Coaching Every ch has a trusted adult in school *1	Thorough trans.n Knowing pupils v well before they arrive								Flexible consistency			For staff and students: "High challenge and high support"		
RC C	Daily KW check ins				Staff training, support, understanding			Personalised project-based *2							
VS H1 CL	With key, trusted adult who is interested in ch				Unconditional Positive Regard Understanding the Window of Tolerance			Play in secondary school (playgrounds bare)							
VS H2 CK								Not fixated on set curriculum: meet interests and needs	& leadership stability (and staff stability)	Flexible approach to dealing with regulation /adaptations in environment					

VSH3AW	all individuals are valued, CYP are support & nurtured in a warm but firm, consistent approach			Culture - the values, ethos and inclusivity of a setting					Leadership - this is not only from the top, but at all levels						
Research Group (ARC)	JB EF et al														
SISS1	At least one trusted person														
SISS 2	-														Feel safe in environment
SISS3	Interactions with teachers at secondary level often change: eg. sarcasm									Flexibility		Trust/hope in self *3			
SG (US)						Understand brain:body systems to know themselves						Self understanding/appreciation to counter shame & anxiety			

											See their own uniqueness				
M (US)			Visibility: I'm seen												Predicatbility
LD (Aus)								Interest-based learning							Physically/ emotionally – OK to make a mistake
Stirling EP								Flexible, relevant, purposeful curriculum							
Alloa EP															
A Academy	Hub (6 students) Family relationships too										Spaces & time available				
Oakwood															
AW: WBC															
SSPS							Staff support for one another								

HHS	& with families	Know the child						Curriculum delivery allows s to feel special/seen (eg a meal & key staff invited)		Reasonable adjustments: not the same sanctions. Taking time					
GAA	Identified staffer who has flexibility to use a variety of approaches (and adaptations)									flexibility to use a variety of approaches (and adaptations)					
Head of Centre WBC	Wrap around care. Interest in each ch as an indiv. & regular contact with family (regularly 2x daily)							Calm Teachers		Being flexi when they are struggling.					
SE (WBC)					Awareness of issues/emotions. On board with RI Attutitude							Dev ch's autonomy/agency. Scaffolding to practise conflict			

MPS							Consistency (staff stress means unpredicatbility)								
MHS					Staff understanding their own emotions/regulation										
A B					Neuroscience understanding if child: "I've never met a child who doesn't want to learn"							Staff, and student optimism: student self-esteem	Belief: in student success.		
A S		Voice of young people drives practice								Adaptations where necessary		Affirming practice (acceptance/ affirmation of ND)			
A L (also trains etc in sec sector)	In big secondaries: "make their world small again" Consistent child around child Perseverance: ch	Team knows ch & this informs school decisions. Notice what child needs													Consistency within an appropriate structure – give safety

	will sabotage relationships, bit important to persist, not: "We've tried everything: its time to exclude"	and respond (in a structured way)													
TOTAL: Secondary	28/28	8	1	3	15	4	4	10	3	10	4	7	3	3	7

Secondary: those who work in or with the sector.

[Appendix 2: Sharing Report Findings…]

Appendix 2

Whanaungatanga mo te Aiotanga

Lynda Knight-de Blois

Sharing Findings

I will share my report, its findings and executive summary in the following ways...

Porirua:

Locally

I will share my report with the Glenview School Board and Staff. There is wider interest across Porirua: some principals and teachers have requested a copy and there is interest in a presentation for local schools

Educators across NZ:

Nationally

SOCIAL MEDIA: The report will be shared in the following Facebook groups: NZ Principals Closed; Trauma-informed Educators NZ; Neuroscience and Trauma-informed Network Aotearoa (NATINA); Aotearoa Educators Collective ; DisruptED. There will be videoed presentations shared on SM and there are references to it in the Podcasts: *Unconditional* and *We Need More of This.* (Spotify)

Wider NZ Public:

I will look for opportunities to share the report findings in mainstream media. I have three times been interviewed on Kathryn Ryan's RNZ programme: she was interested in my Fellowship / sabbatical trip before I left, and it is possible I will talk again to her on Radio next year. I will likely do a Press Release to send to interested outlets. The WCMF Trust will publish the report on their website.

International Interest:

Globally

I will send a copy of the report to everyone who was a participant in the research or a host. This includes people in Scotland, England, the United States and Australia. I expect the Chair of The Attachment Research Community (ARC) will publish the report on their website. When in England I was interviewed for two episodes of a Podcast series for ARC that will come out in 2025. I anticipate that the presenters of the Trauma-informed Educators Network and the Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint (both US-based) Podcasts will be interested in the report.

Government MPs and Officials:

Government

In March 2025 Glenview School has the Minister of Education, Erica Stanford, visiting. I will send a copy of this report in advance of her visit. In fact her office has already signalled that they would be interested to receive it as soon as it is available. In anticipation of a possible change of government in two years, it could be good to send the report to relevant MPs currently in opposition. I will also share the report with Ministry of Education officials in both the National and Wellington Region offices.

Whanaungatanga mo te Aiotanga

Influencing

Educators, Leaders & Policy-makers

Established reputation:

As one of the first school principals in Aotearoa to lead trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed school transformation I have established a large following and a growing reputation. In 2021 I became the first NZ educator to be certified as an Advanced Trainer in Dr Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model in Education. I began the Trauma-informed Educators Facebook Group in 2020 and it now has 5622 members. The story of Glenview School and my narrative about the power of neuroscience within education has featured on TV3 and RNZ stories as well as in a number of podcasts and print media articles.

I have delivered presentations on the kaupapa in a number of NZ towns and cities, and in Brisbane, Manchester and Coventry(UK). I have worked, and continue to work with, schools and Early Childhood centres across NZ to provide Professional Development. As an experienced and respected educational leader, I will have many opportunities in 2025 and beyond to share the findings of my Fellowship Report across the country. Many of these events and training platforms will include extra support, provided by me, so educators and leaders can adopt the report recommendations and implement powerful strategies in their schools and across the education sector.

Engagement with Government:

In 2021 former Ministers Jan Tinetti and Marama Davidson, and MPs Barbara Edmonds and Jan Logie visited Glenview School on two separate occasions. We had invited the Labour MPs so we could share the impact that our approach could have, not just on education but on wider and longitudinal social and health outcomes for young people; the Green Party requested a visit. We know these visits had a positive impact on all these government representatives:
"Yesterday I was blessed to visit Glenview School... we were there to learn about the trauma-informed approach they use... One of the most important visits ever." - Marama Davidson

In March 2025 we have the current Minister of Education, Erica Stanford, visiting Glenview. She has signalled that Learning Support, including 'complex behaviours' is an area she wants to address this year. I am optimistic that she will be interested to read the Executive Summary, if not all of my Fellowship Report. As mentioned, her private Secretary has already asked for a copy of my report once it has been approved by the WCMT Board.

For these reasons I believe my report will influence educators and leaders to make changes in their schools. I am optimistic that my findings will influence policy makers to explore interventions which impact the education sector in general.