

RESTORATIVE AMBASSADORS COULD STEM RISING TIDE OF EXCLUSIONS, SAYS UTU

As pupil suspensions from Northern Ireland schools rocket, teachers believe Restorative Justice could be a way to tackle the rising tide of violence in the classroom.

“More than 10,000 pupils were suspended from schools across Northern Ireland in the last three years and a further 73 were expelled because of their indiscipline, according to the Education Authority,” said Avril Hall Callaghan, General Secretary of the Ulster Teachers’ Union.

“Our teaching colleagues in England are facing a similar shocking rise in exclusions and expulsions but the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) there wants to expand its existing work in schools as a means of reducing those statistics.

“Restorative Justice has already been widely used in Northern Ireland within justice system bringing offenders face to face with their victims and it’s used in schools too – but a more focussed and centralised approach could help stem this shocking rise in the number of violent incidents leading to growing numbers of exclusions.

“Across Northern Ireland, more than 3,500 suspensions in the last three years were for a physical attack on a fellow student, while more than 600 related to physical attacks on school staff.

“The number of reported physical assaults on teachers has risen from approximately 210 assaults in 2014/15 to 650 in 2015/16.

“Restorative Justice, however, is a process whereby all parties with a stake in a particular incident would come together to resolve collectively how to deal with its aftermath and its implications for the future.

“Restorative Justice can be used to foster good relationships and resolve conflicts in a way that enhances understanding in pupils and shapes better future behaviour.

Pupils themselves can be 'restorative ambassadors', helping classmates resolve conflicts and develop empathy.

"Exclusions and expulsions are a swift sanction for schools seeking to address poor behaviour. But they often have a negative impact on the young person affected.

"Research also suggests exclusions are linked to long-term mental health problems and future criminal behaviour – more than half of UK prisoners were excluded from school.

"Of course the pressure on schools is huge around pupil results and if the quickest way to improve results is to remove barriers – like disruptive pupils – then you can see why that happens.

"Restorative Justice might not deliver the fast results of a more punitive approach but what is the longterm cost?

"Schools need the support to deliver the best possible outcomes for all their pupils or risk producing an increasingly alienated section of society."