



**We
are on a
journey**

**Implementing
Trauma Informed Approaches
in Northern Ireland**

**Case Study:
Fane Street Primary School**

- ▶ Montserrat Fargas Malet
- ▶ Suzanne Mooney



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**



SBNI
Safeguarding Board
for Northern Ireland

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge all the research participants and organisational representatives who dedicated some of their busy work schedules to take part in this study. Special thanks are extended to the case study participants, i.e., senior managers and staff in Fane Street Primary School, the Youth Justice Agency, the Salvation Army UK and Thorndale Parenting Service, and the Belfast Inclusion Health Service in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. We hope we have done justice to the thoughtful insights, challenges and learning shared with us in the different elements of this report.

We would also like to acknowledge the cross-Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) whose funding of the Trauma Informed Practice team has enabled the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to commission this research. The support of the SBNI and the research working group has been invaluable throughout, helping shape the report methodology and ensuring wide cross-sectoral participation.

Abbreviations

ACE:	Adverse Childhood Experience
CYP:	Children and young people
EPPOC:	cross-Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime
HSC:	Health and Social Care
REA:	Rapid Evidence Assessment
SAMHSA:	Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration USA
SBNI:	Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland
TIA:	Trauma Informed Approach
TIC:	Trauma Informed Care
TIP:	Trauma Informed Practice
V/C:	Voluntary and Community

Credit for photos:

 front cover	Photo by Andrew Neel - Unsplash.
 page 3	Photo by Heidi Fin - Unsplash.
 page 4	Photo by Javier Allegue Barros - Unsplash.
 page 36	Photo by Mario Dobelmann - Unsplash.

Contents

Introduction to Case Studies	4
1.1 Introduction	5
1.2 Case Studies Overview	5
1.3 A brief note on terminology and conceptualisation	6
Case Study: Fane Street Primary School	8
2.1 The context	9
2.2 Trauma-informed Initiatives	10
2.2.1 Nurturing approach	10
2.2.2 Restorative practice	16
2.2.3 Whole-family approach	18
2.3 Enablers, Barriers and Challenges	23
2.4 Outcomes and Perceived Benefits	29
2.5 School vision and priorities	32
2.6 Lessons learned	32



Introduction to Case Studies



1.1 Introduction

This case study is part of a larger research study which sought to review the implementation of trauma informed approaches (TIAs) in Northern Ireland (NI). This study was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board NI (SBNI) and undertaken by a research team based at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), primarily made up of academics and researchers based at the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work (SSESW) (including Dr Suzanne Mooney, Principal Investigator; Dr Montse Fargas-Malet, Research Fellow; Professor Lisa Bunting; Dr Lorna Montgomery; Dr Mandi McDonald; Dr Colm Walsh; Professor Davy Hayes), in close collaboration with Ms Deirdre O'Neill in the QUB School of Nursing and Midwifery (SONM). Each case study involved a smaller number of the team members. The full review of TIA implementation in NI consisted of four distinct components:

- (i) **a rapid evidence assessment** of national and international literature reviews about the key components of effective TIA implementation to embed and sustain developments in diverse real world settings and methods for the evaluation of effectiveness. This REA builds on the findings of the systematic evidence review conducted by team members on behalf of SBNI in 2018-19 (Bunting et al., 2019a);
- (ii) **progress mapping** of TIA implementation across key sectors and organisations in NI via a bespoke online survey;
- (iii) **a strategic overview** of senior managers and professionals' assessment of TIA implementation in their area of expertise and the region as a whole via a series of online focus groups; and
- (iv) **four in-depth case studies** of selected cross-sector trauma-informed implementation initiatives in NI.

Each review component built on the findings of the other elements and concluded with a distinctive output. The outputs of all four components were brought together and recommendations provided for how SBNI and partner agencies could progress the implementation of TIAs in NI. The full

report (Mooney et al., 2024a) and Executive Summary Report (Mooney et al., 2024b) are available online via the SBNI website <https://www.safeguardingni.org/trauma-informed-approaches/latest-research>

1.2 Case Studies Overview

Methodology

An integrated process and outcomes evaluation approach was adopted to establish a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of four selected trauma-informed initiatives specifically enquiring about: 1) what was implemented; 2) how it was implemented; 3) what difference it made and to whom; as well as 4) perceived enablers and barriers within the service context and 5) transferable implementation learning. The primary aim was to show what TIA implementation looked like in diverse settings and capture important organisational learning, which could be applied to other service settings wishing to progress TIA implementation. In these ways, it was anticipated that the case studies would help provide a vision for ongoing development. Case study methods encompassed three core activities: 1) analysis of relevant documentation or information related to the TI initiative provided by the case study service; 2) a focus group with key people associated with the development or leadership of the initiative; and 3) a focus group of staff drawn from different positions across the organisation who had differential experience of the TIA initiative. All focus groups were conducted online, recorded and transcribed.

Selection

Case study organisations or services were selected by the QUB Research Team from the online survey submissions (Element 2) where respondents had indicated an interest in case study participation. All the case studies selected had implemented TIAs across the three primary implementation domains adopted by this study i.e. (i) organisational development, (ii) workforce development and support, and (iii) service design and delivery (see below for further detail). Four case studies were identified using critical case sampling, taking account of: organisation/service size; target population (adult/child); service setting; geographical remit; and service sector.

General description of the case studies

The four case studies selected were drawn from different types of service settings, including Education, Justice, and Health and Social Care. They also involved both statutory and voluntary/community organisations of different sizes, serving different populations (see Table 1.1). Each case study organisation presented unique implementation strategies and initiatives, relevant to their service setting, purpose and population. Each case study is available separately on the SBNI website.

Table 1.1: Case study description

	Type	Setting	Size	Service users	Area
Youth Justice Agency	Statutory	Justice	100-500 employees	Children/young people	Regional
Fane Street Primary School	Statutory	Education	Less than 100	Children/young people	Belfast
Salvation Army UK/Thorndale Family Service	Voluntary	Multiple settings/ Social Care	500 plus employees	Children, young people & adults	UK/ Regional
Belfast Inclusion Health Service	Statutory	Health	500 plus employees	Adults	Belfast HSC Trust

1.3 A brief note on terminology and conceptualisation

The overarching term of **Trauma Informed Approaches (TIAs)** was adopted in this review to encompass Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) and Trauma Informed Care (TIC) as a means to reflect the relevance of TIAs for organisations which do not provide frontline services as well as those which do.

TIA Implementation domains: In the interest of achieving relevance for this cross-sector TIA organisational implementation review, the research team sought to merge and adapt the primary implementation frameworks available i.e. SAMHSA's (2014) ten implementation domains; Hanson and Lang's (2016) implementation framework for child welfare and justice settings; and the Trauma and Learning Partnership Initiative (TLPI) framework (Cole et al., 2013), which considered the development of trauma-sensitive schools. The following overarching framework was thus proposed encompassing three core implementation domains (organisational development; workforce development and support; and service design and delivery). Within each overarching domain, there are a number of specific implementation foci or indicators which require attention. It is acknowledged that while whole system TIA implementation includes action across at least two of these core domains, not all implementation indicators will be relevant to every organisation, dependent upon their purpose and mandate. For example, the service design and delivery domain may have different resonance dependent upon whether the organisation is a frontline service provider or a support, regulatory, commissioning or governance body (See Figure 1.1). These implementation domains and indicators were used in the analysis of each case study.

Organisational development: a range of organisational developments including governance and leadership; financing and resourcing; review of policies and procedures; the physical environment; enhanced service user involvement; progress monitoring and evaluation.

Workforce development and staff support: training and development initiatives directly related to supporting staff understanding of the impact of trauma and adversity on service users and ongoing support/supervision/training to embed practice change; support for staff wellbeing.

Service design and delivery: initiatives which sought to embed trauma-informed practices into their universal service delivery (e.g. an intentionality towards enhanced relational connection with service users; reduced use of practices which might retraumatise etc.); integrating recognition of service users' trauma history into assessment, planning and intervention; or increased access to targeted trauma-focused services and interventions i.e. specialist interventions for service user cohorts, such as group work or therapeutic modalities.

Figure 1.1: TIA Implementation Domains



Case Study: Fane Street Primary School



2.1 The Context

Fane Street Primary School is a Controlled co-educational Primary School located between Donegal Avenue and the Lisburn Road in Belfast. The school originally opened in 1929 as a public elementary school, although it was a secondary school for a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s.

The pupil population has grown and changed over the years. In the early 2000s, pupils were primarily from a white working-class Protestant background (mainly from the Village area and also the Lisburn Road) with a small minority of Chinese children. Since 2008, however, the diversity of backgrounds has increased exponentially with children from a Muslim background now the main religion represented in the pupil population (see Table 2.1). At the same time, pupil turnover has gone from less than one per cent in 2008 to over 30 per cent in 2023 with families regularly arriving and leaving, sometimes at short notice, primarily due to their accommodation needs. These changes have brought both challenges and opportunities, as explained in the other sections.

Table 2.1: Fane Street Primary School Pupil Population 2008 and 2023 (as provided by Fane Street)

September 2008	September 2023
145 pupils	327 pupils
76% indigenous 14% EAL	10% indigenous 90% EAL
6 languages (including English)	42+ languages (including English)
Main religion: Protestant 55.1%	Main religion: Muslim 31.5%
Others: Roman Catholic 16.6% Muslim 7.6% No religion 1.3% Other Christian 0.7% Hindu 0.7%	Others: Protestant: 21.7% Roman Catholic 15.6% Other Christian 13.15% No religion 11.31% Hindu 5.5% Buddhist 0.92% Unclassified 0.31%
Refugee/ Asylum Seeker Population: 0%	Refugee/Asylum Seeker Population: 15%
Pupil Turnover: 0.8% in year (excluding Intake and Transition)	Pupil Turnover: 31% in year (excluding Intake and Transition)

2.2 Trauma-informed Initiatives

Figure 2.1 summarises the initiatives developed in Fane Street within the key three TIA implementation domains, i.e., organisational development, workforce development and support, and service delivery and practice change. Some initiatives are represented within more than one domain. For instance, a focus on restorative practices encompasses all three areas i.e. while seeking to respond differently to behavioural challenges in the classroom (practice change), a new policy was developed to move from a punishment-based to a restorative relationship-based approach (organisational development) with staff across the school provided with training and ongoing support to develop and implement these changes in their everyday work with children (workforce development and support). In this case study, we found three key trauma-informed approaches that permeated throughout the school: a restorative justice approach, a whole-family approach and a nurturing approach.

2.2.1 Nurturing approach

Fane Street Primary School clearly adopts a nurturing approach, which is embedded throughout the whole school and the way it works. This nurturing approach was noted as being rooted in the Principal's own personal ethos, summed up with this phrase:

“We’re here to teach. And to me, you teach with care. You’re caring for the children.” (Principal)

The Principal explained how her own teaching experience and educational vision had aligned well with her introduction to TIP. This vision was represented by building what she called ‘social credit’ with the children, ensuring that they knew they were cared for:

“I suppose it came really from my own ethos over the years as a teacher. (...) I also taught in North Belfast for 13 years... (...) So I was aware of all those generational issues that are still there. So it was... always to me, it’s always the social credit with the children that they actually know they’re cared for. (...) it just came from my own personal beliefs that, you

know, shouting at a child doesn’t work (...) And the more I heard about the trauma informed practice, that’s what we were kind of trying to implement anyway..”

This nurturing approach permeates all policies, practices and procedures in Fane Street PS, and is considered vital to the school's functioning. It involves adopting a caring mindset for all pupils and knowing each individual child. Although a key pillar of this approach is the fully functioning and staffed Nurture Room, called the ‘Sunshine Room’, the nurturing approach can be seen within the entire school, and is closely integrated with the restorative justice approach (explained in the next sub-section).

This nurturing approach starts at the beginning of each school day with **‘check-ins’ and ‘meet and greet’**, when a small team of staff members is at the front door every morning to welcome all the pupils (and their families/caregivers). This ‘meet and greet’ team includes the nurture teacher, nurture assistant, the Principal and the SENCO teacher. This is considered ‘a vital part’ of the school day to help relieve children's worries, settling them in for the day. It gives staff the opportunity to detect any difficulties or issues, which can be subsequently passed on to the class teacher. Class teachers reported that they valued this daily information-sharing, which facilitates them to be more attentive to the children that need it on a particular day and are better equipped to understand their behaviours. It was noted that this daily practice is especially important for particular children who are thought to need this additional re-assurance at the start of the school day:

“We meet and greet in the mornings to make sure that the children know that they’ve been noticed on the way in, and they can actually just do a quick check in with [the nurture staff] first thing in the morning. And if you don’t speak to those children, they’re looking at you, why have you not spoken to me, you know? And even if they don’t answer you, they’re still looking for that little check-in in the morning.”

(Principal)

“I would be part of the meet and greet in the mornings and I find that it’s a vital part of starting our day with the children, you get to see the children as they come in and you know the different wee moods, and maybe if something’s not right at home (...) especially children, who would be known to say the nurture room or known just to the teacher, that they maybe have different backgrounds, different home lives, and we can get a chat with them, you know, just good morning or if they give you a hug, they approach us, and sometimes they just need a hug in the morning to start their day. But it’s very much that starts them off for the day and we can then go and speak to the teacher and say, ‘X has come into school today. They’re not feeling... Mum has spoken to me or dad or whoever the carer is at home...’ And you know, the day starts and we’re always on the lookout for them, you know, from the get-go, from the minute they walk in the doors of school.”

(Nurture Assistant)

‘Check-ins’ for particular children are also conducted after lunch, as this might be particularly important when medications wear off, and children become tired, etc.:

“We’ve got check-ins for children straight after lunchtime because that can be a flashpoint for children.”

(Nurture Teacher)

As already mentioned, one of the key elements of this approach is **the Nurture Unit itself**, which is staffed by a dedicated nurture teacher and assistant, who work closely together to provide care for children who need it. This unit was self-funded by the school, as they did not automatically qualify for one, supplemented by the use of the extra funds they get for newcomer children, as explained below:

“Over the years, as we got more newcomer children, more traumatised children, I suppose we started to look and say, well look, other schools are getting nurture. Why are we not getting nurture? And we sat down Monday and thought and chatted about it, and just went through it all. (...) because we were getting the newcomer support money, I wanted to put it into teaching English to the children, because that’s what it’s for. But I also wanted to address the issues that they had as well. So that was where the nurture teacher came from, and I didn’t want to do it half-heartedly. I wanted to do it properly. I wanted to do it the way that it’s meant to be done.”

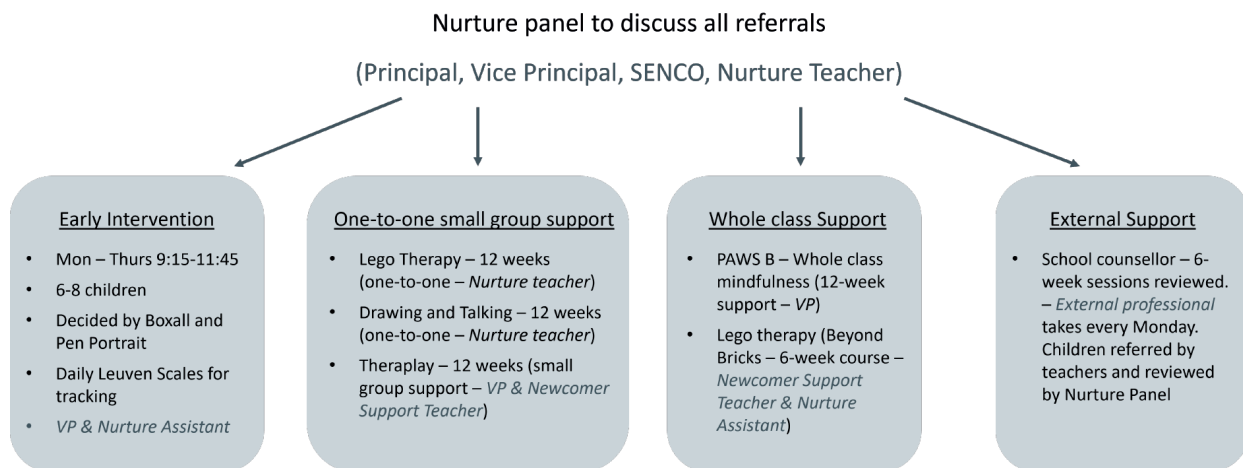
(Principal)

In the nurture room or ‘Sunshine room’, there is a full timetable for a specific group of children in the morning and one-to-one therapeutic work in the afternoons, with inputs tailored to meet the needs of individual children:

“We’ve got early intervention, which is run like a full timetable nurture environment for... we’ve seven children at the moment (...). That’s from Monday to Thursday, up to lunchtime (...) And then in the afternoon, I do one-to-one work as well with selected children. They may be children that have been with myself in the early intervention. We then do theraplay, drawing and talking, Lego therapy. So selected children that are struggling for whatever reason really get a lot of care and support. You know, and we don’t take them out of the nurture sphere or nurture umbrella until we’re really, really happy that the child is settled and can cope. And that could be going from early intervention, full timetable to one-on-one support or even just to check in on a daily or weekly basis.”

(Nurture Teacher)

Figure 2.1: Fane Street Nurture Support Provision Map (provided by the Principal)



Staff, however, recognise that children's needs and situations change, thus, the children who have check-ins or who are in the Nurture Unit for the morning timetable also come and go. In other words, the school uses a flexible approach based on need, adapting to those constant changes (see Figure 2.1). This approach is thought to work well, in part, because of the effective communication and collaboration between staff in the school. Nurture panel meetings are regularly set up by the nurture teacher with the Principal to discuss the needs of individual children. Teachers are also encouraged to talk with the nurture teacher if they have concerns about any particular child to see if they require individual support. In this way, the **nurturing approach is extended to all children in the school**, with additional supports put in place or eased out when no longer required:

“So it’s selected children there, (...) I think what’s so important is clarity and communication with the teachers and your team and your staff, because we have an open door in the Sunshine Room, so that after school, any teacher can come and talk to me about any child. So (...) we may have children whose situation changes, whose life changes (...) we’ve got to be really open to those changes. And it comes from great communication because teachers will come to me about children and say, ‘they’re really struggling because of XYZ.’ So the first thing we look at is, When are they struggling? Why are they struggling? What are the issues? If it’s a child that’s struggling in the afternoons, and I can think of one child we have, that’s on medication that runs out in his system around lunchtime. (...) he comes to me de-stress, we’ll play a game (...) or something calming, and that sets him up

for the remaining 45 minutes. So no, it’s not just a specific list of children, it’s on a need-by-need basis. And those needs can change, check-ins can change, because (...) if children are coping really, really well, then we’ll start taking really slowly provision away, because the children need independence as well. So there’s one lad I think I’ve had that has been with me from P1 and he’s now P5, and(...) he’s gone full early intervention. Then he’s gone check-in morning and afternoon, then he’s gone check-in just afternoon, and now he’s on a check-in only on a Monday. But he’s still there. I’m still checking on him, making sure he’s alright.”

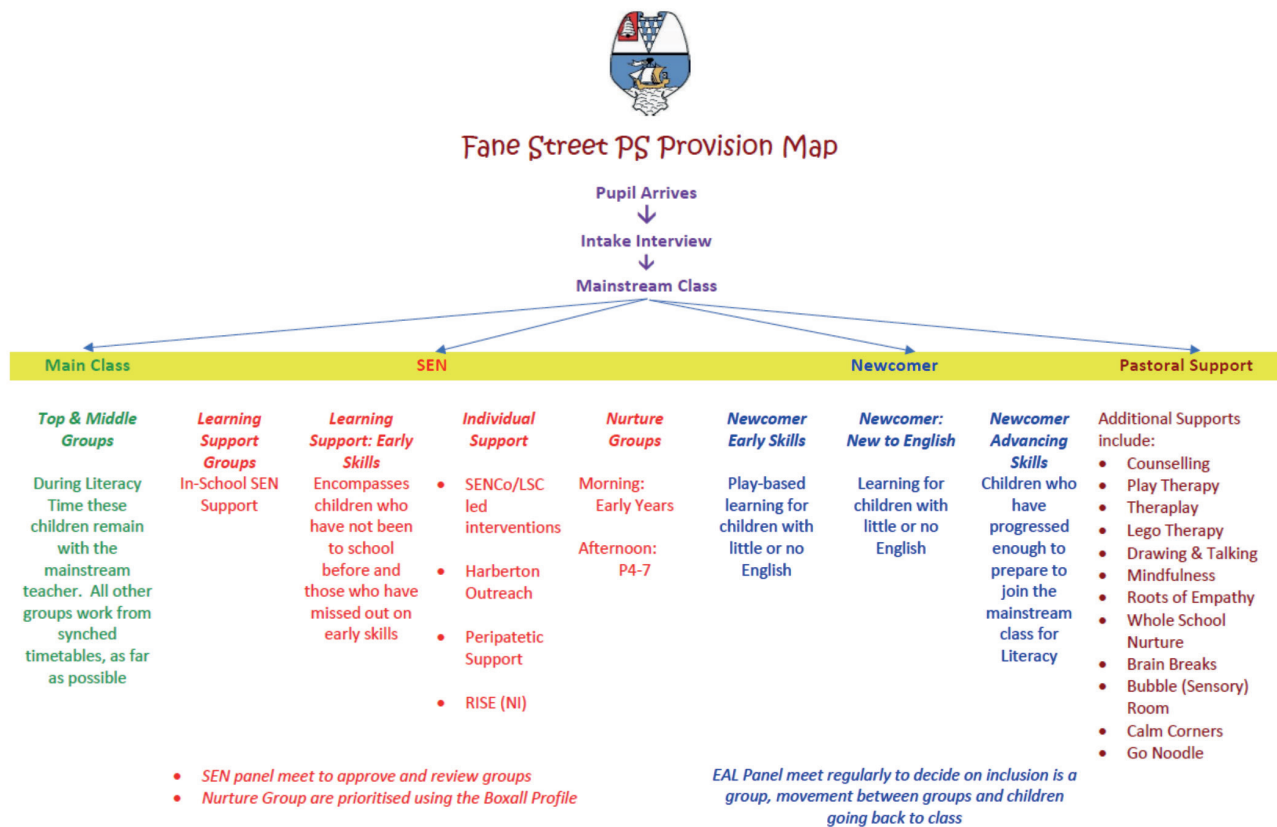
(Nurture Teacher)

This tailored approach, which originally came about due to the increasing enrolment of newcomer children, has been extended this year with three specialist non-classroom-based teachers to support children with a range of additional needs (see Figure 2.2 below):

“We get extra money for the newcomer children that we have (...) and because we’ve such a high number, we thought, right, how are we going to use this money best for the children that it’s aimed at? So initially we started off by having extra support where the children were out of class. So we have a really comprehensive system now. This year is our first year of having three teachers who work outside the class to work with the children. So we’ve children who need a play-based approach. We have children who are new to English but don’t need as much play. And then we have children who are preparing to go back to the mainstream class. So that covers their education.”

(Principal)

Figure 2.2: Fane Street PS Provision Map (Provided by the Principal)



This tailored approach is important because, as well as recognising the fluid nature of children's needs and situations, the leadership in the school also recognises the diversity of the pupil population the school provides for. Thus, although many of their pupils are generally identified as 'newcomers', the term 'newcomer' can be problematic, as it masks the great diversity of this group of children:

"We have newcomer families that are coming in that are professionals, we've newcomers coming in (...) that are living in hotels, you know, the term newcomer does not do it to justice. There are newcomer children who come in that we can tell straight away... they've got zero English, but we know the place for this child, if they choose to do so, you know, they can push on, they can go to [names of grammar schools] and whatever they want to do. We know that they're coming, and they've got real potential there, or whatever else it might be. We know others are going to have to be um... (...) it's meeting where they're at, giving them what they need in order to then help them make the next step. But it's being ready to make that difference from the word go."

(Vice-Principal)

Another key element of the nurturing approach is that **children's achievements, both big and small, are celebrated** and rewarded. For instance, children 'graduate' from the Nurture Unit with a graduation ceremony, and a reward system has been developed around five key basic principles (listening, looking, speaking, thinking and concentrating), which allows for constant encouragement of small achievements tailored to build children's independence and self-confidence/self-worth/self-belief:

"We would celebrate the children that have been through the nurture room. You know, we would call them graduates of the nurture room. We celebrate their actual graduation ceremony. (...) That sort of sticks with them if you like. Everybody knows, you know, they've been through there. They've done that, you know, they're blossoming back in class. They're really giving it their best shot. It doesn't mean it's always a smooth road when they leave. Of course, it isn't. But (...) they've really shown that they're able to cope back in a full class environment, and maybe do just need that check-in once a week with [the nurture teacher] (...) they're very much looked up to by the other children. (...) what they've done is celebrated."

(Vice-Principal)

"We try and do something in the Sunshine Room called the 'Upward cycle of success'. So ... it's very different, you know, you can run your nurture room in any way that you want really. But the way I run it is based on five key principles of listening, looking, speaking, thinking and concentrating. And we have a reward system on a board. So as soon as they show me any one of those skills, I can put on a star on the board and make a big show of it. Now, we do have individual targets as well, but cause we've stripped it back to those five really, really basic skills is that a child who may have not been doing very well in class and really struggling to achieve what's been asked from them, or maybe from a home background where reading books and working together and praise is not forthcoming or has been around the world, have been in a refugee camp, and had to survive and not necessarily had lots of... you know, praise and enjoyment and experiences. We can really, really quickly build this child's confidence by saying, 'You looked at me. Well done. That's great looking. There's a star'. 'You spoke. You

shared something, there is a star'. So from the moment that they come into the room, to the moment that they leave the room, they're being rewarded continuously."

(Nurture Teacher)

Recording and evaluating progress was also reported as important. An example of that was given by the nurture teacher, who explained how he records comments about positive changes from family at home, peers at school, etc. within a 'Statement of Impact' document for each child in the Nurture Unit as another means to celebrate a child's progress:

"Now, it's a bit difficult and it would be unrealistic for the whole school to do this, but I have a document I created called the 'Statements of Impact' because, as well as your Boxall profile* and your daily observations and daily movement scale, I wanted little statements. You hear these little titbits and little snippets from home, from in class, from outside in the playground. So each child in the nurture room with me has this document. And anytime I hear a positive comment from the time they've been with me, I just date it and put it in. It could be a link to an observation. It could be a phone call with the parent at home who's saying he now uses a knife and fork at home and never used to, now can go to bed at time, and that might seem insignificant on its own, but when I put it in the statements of impacts, we can see this lad in school is now playing with children outside, this lad in class is now doing his homework, this lad outside or at home (...) He's now using a knife and fork."

(Nurture Teacher)

* The Boxall Profile provides a framework for the assessment of children and young people's social, emotional and mental health development.

However, as previously said, this **nurturing environment is felt around the whole school** (not just within the Nurture Unit) Examples of how this approach is embedded in the school physical environment include:

- *Bells are turned off:*

"The child gets what the child needs, and you know, they see that. They hear that. They also won't hear certain things. They won't hear the bell going off. We've turned our bells off, you know."

(Vice-Principal)

- *Calm corners in every classroom:*

“In P1, even like my calm corner, I have sort of like pillows and blankets and stuff, and they just go and take themselves off, you know, they know that that’s there for them. So actually, in P1, some of them will get quite tired, you know, they would take themselves off and get a pillow and the blanket around them and say ‘... night night’ and, you know, ‘read me a bedtime story’ or, you know, things like that there. And they need that because for us, ... their needs need to be met first before they can even start doing any sort of learning”

(Teacher)

“(...) in the classroom, you can distinctively see where the Calm corner is and what way it’s branded for each particular child, and you know, they just know. Like even if children do come into the Sunshine Room, which is our nurture room, when they’ve been sent down... and we just go, ‘just go into our calm corner’, and there’s just (...) there’s lots of pillows, we’ve a bubble tube. And it’s just time for them just to get what... just rebalance, you know, their emotions.”

(Nurture Assistant)

- *Images displayed* (to go with words) everywhere to enhance understanding (having in mind that a lot of the children do not speak English as their first language) (e.g. the Feelings thermometer displayed in every classroom):

“I think having really a language rich environment as well as, you know, the likes of images and things is very important for us too, because obviously we are 90% newcomer.

There’s a vast range of languages and language abilities and things like that as well, so making sure that (...) giving them the language, teaching them the language, but also having pictures that go along with that. So they really know when they start to develop their emotional literacy um... can help as well.”

(Teacher)

“We have the feelings thermometer, which is displayed in every classroom and you know, we can say to a child, ‘where are you? how are you feeling?’ And they can say 5 to 1 to 0, whatever feelings they have. And again, it’s right throughout the school, so any teacher can pick up on it

straight away, you know it’s a language thing as well. Where are you on the thermometer? 1, 2, 3, 4, 5? Once you know they’re getting to like 3-4, we need to then kick in with our ‘how can we help you?’”

(Nurture Assistant)

- *The ‘Calm Corridor’*, which was recently renamed with pupil participation during whole school assemblies:

“There’s a particular corridor in school, this year we decided, right, what are we gonna do about this and, you know, it would have been one [corridor] that they would have ran down all the time. And, you know, you can only tell them so many times. Stop running. Please stop running. You can do the proximal praise. Well done. I love how you’re walking, but the best thing we’ve done is actually just rename the corridor. This the Calm Corridor, and it’s simply that’s the expectation and it’s working.”

(Vice-Principal)

[talking about the calm corridor] “And with the trauma that these kids have, they don’t like the loud noises. They really, really struggle with that. So... if that’s what, I don’t know, what a third of them need, then that’s what we have to give them to make them feel safe in school. So it has to work. (...) I think with that particular idea, it came from the kids and ... well, initially from the teachers. But again... the pupil voice ... the whole school, we had a chat about it at assembly, whole school assembly. Then they went off and did little posters, you know, to really try to... [Nurture Assistant: empower] I was going to say advertise [Laughing] But that wasn’t the word I was looking for. Advertise the calm corridor, and then again it’s ownership from them. You know, and it’s really giving them that power that allows them to kind of carry it out. And again, as [Teacher] says, then start to correct each other with that as well. And then, it just becomes the norm.”

(Teacher)

The example of the calm corridor shows how children are also involved and given ownership of the practices and spaces in the school. Other examples of *pupil engagement* were also given by staff, including ‘talk boxes’ in every classroom and circle time:

“Well, the Student Council this year introduced ‘talk boxes’ and the talk boxes have been put in each classroom and the children can go and put in there a wee idea, anonymous or whatever way they choose (...) the teacher can read them and see what the children feel. And again, there’s sometimes you might pick up on something in those boxes, unexpected, that a child is struggling, that you maybe don’t see, but it’s their way of letting us know they have the voice to tell their teacher.”

(Nurture Assistant)

“I was going to mention circle time. I think given the kids, just a time in the week or in the day to be listened to and to put their opinions across is really important as well. And I know that we’ve had lots of ideas that have come out of our circle time in P7, which has been great because I think, just building that 10-15 minutes into the week even, even that short amount of time really has helped with pupil voice, and giving them just again the ownership over, you know, their experience in school.”

(Teacher)

Finally, this caring, nurturing environment is not exclusively for pupils, but is also **evident in the way the School seeks to look after the staff**. Examples reported in focus groups included: staff team meetings; informal support; members of staff feeling listened to and supported by the Principal and Vice-Principal, who have a commitment to an ‘open door’ policy. This element is further discussed as a key TIA implementation enabler in the Barriers and Enablers section below.

2.2.2 Restorative practice

The nurturing approach is complemented by a restorative practice approach in relation to behaviour management. The combination of these two core approaches was described by the school leadership with the phrase ‘**high care, high boundaries**’. In the same way that achievements are acknowledged and rewarded, mistakes/negative behaviours are also acknowledged (rather than ignored), as a means to promote learning and have ambition for the children:

“Yes, we want to provide nurture for these children, but we also want the very, very best for these children. So if these children make a mistake, which I’m sure they will, you know, a social mistake, let’s say, we give them a consequence. We give them a consequence with learning to say what could be done better next time. But we don’t just gloss over and say, never mind, don’t worry about it. We have a high boundary, and we say this is how you do better next time. (...) if they’re particularly traumatised or they’ve had attachment issues at home, they need to know where they stand. So we have to set the high boundaries, and so many parents will say, ‘oh, well, they’ve been through a lot of trauma’ or ‘yes, they’ve got some special needs’ or ‘he’s autistic, he doesn’t understand’. But if you don’t set the high boundaries, how are the children ever going to learn?”

(Principal)

“That’s the one, high care, high boundaries. It has to be high care, high boundaries and, you know, and there are high expectations with that as well. (...) We’ve done our job when they’re able to tell us what choices they could make the next time. That’s when we’ve done our job, well actually when they’ve actioned that, when they’ve been in a similar situation and made a good choice, and again we’ll celebrate that, ‘oh, you’ve made a great choice there’, and it just happens naturally.”

(Vice-Principal)

This approach, which was mentioned in both focus groups, is characterised by a key change of policy - from a behaviour management policy (punitive approach) to a **positive relationship-based policy**. According to one of the staff focus group participants, this change of policy has made a significant positive difference to the pupils in the school:

“Rather than the punitive approach that schools tend to take and still tend to take, which is unfortunate, we would actually do a review of what the children have done and chat through them and ask what has happened and say, you know what, what post-incident learning can we get from this? So... I use the PIL app, which is a post-incident learning app. Most of the other staff use paper copies.”

(Principal)

“There’s a very clear difference whenever we switched that policy from punishment-based to positive behaviour, there is no doubt that there was a huge, huge difference, in terms of the child’s um... confidence, their self-esteem, you know, their learning process of all of that, emotional literacy and building upon that, giving them a voice, you know, all of that has been really, really beneficial.”

(Teacher)

A key element of this approach is the lunch time practice led by the Vice Principal and the nurture teacher.

“We’ve got a restorative justice approach that myself and [name of Vice Principal] do during lunchtime, for if there’s any problems outside, any arguments or conflicts, rather than a stand at the wall approach or a punitive approach, we bring the children in, and we go through our restorative scripts to talk about what happened, how behaviours can change and look for ... each individual case as learning, you know, as someone, how they can learn. They can learn from the things that’s happened.”

(Nurture Teacher)

However, the lunchtime practices are just one element of this relationship-based approach. All staff are expected to adopt the approach, with training and additional support provided to see beyond children’s behaviours and find ways to support them to heal relationship fractures:

“We’ve done quite a bit of training over the years. ... particularly with [name of trainer], who’s really kind of big on trauma informed practice (...) ... one of the things that did come out of that was the restorative practice (...), if you know which child does display kind of negative behaviours, it’s looking at where is that coming from and what’s that telling us, but also not punishing the child for that, you know, really having natural consequences and really discussing and going deeper. Yeah, really trying to enrich the child to say, you know, ‘OK, this has happened. What can we do now? what can we do to help you? What can we do to help restore the relationship between you and this other child, or whatever? you know, not just leaving them there or taking something off them, you know, really building that positive relationship, meeting them where they’re at and helping them, you know, really modelling and helping them through what’s going on. So I think that [training] has been great for us.”

(Teacher)

Thus, negative or ‘challenging’ behaviours in the classroom are dealt with in a consistent manner throughout the school, albeit with the age and stage of each child taken into account. While older children were reported to be given time and space to calm down with a series of steps in place if the behaviours continued, for younger children, the teacher spent some of her time teaching about feelings and giving children options to deal with them (e.g. calm corner, puppets, talking with someone, using the feelings thermometer to communicate their feelings, etc.):

“if a child does this in class, then they go to a certain area within the class to calm down or you know, they’re given options at that point, and then further on, if it keeps happening, then they get, they go out for a little chat to one of the senior members of staff, so (...) the vice principal. Um... then after that kind of timeout period where they’ve calmed down where, they’ve been, you know, chatted to, they’ll come back into class. And if that re-occurs, then the same steps are taken, you know, and then after so many steps, obviously, if that’s not working, then there would be maybe a call home or a parent brought in to really discuss what’s going on, to see if there is something else, you know, that’s

really annoying the child that's making them, you know, do the, I don't know, low level stuff, I guess, is what we're dealing with (...) It's different further down the school, but yeah, ours would be low level things that would happen, and usually a call home is all it takes to say, 'look, such and such have done this today, it was three times and we've, you know, chatted to them', and usually the parent will say 'well, do you know what? actually this has happened at home, this could be, you know, annoying them, or you know things are not going well', or else it could just be 'OK, I'll chat to them' and then usually (...) it's done and dusted."

(Teacher)

"in P1, you definitely would get some children who would definitely need to go and speak to, you know, the [vice-Principal or Nurture teacher] and it would be quite negative behaviours you would see, but I think also for young children, they don't have the language or they don't have the like emotional literacy to comprehend what's going on. So they can't tell you in words, so they're then lashing out in their behaviour. So a lot of P1, we spend a lot of time like learning about what your feelings actually are, and what that looks like, and what you can do if you're feeling like this, you know, you can go to the calm corner, there's puppets, you can speak to someone, you know, go through all the options that they have for each of their feelings. And it is beneficial for them because by the end of the year, you know, you will find that they are starting to identify 'I am feeling like this'. (...) 'This is probably what I need to do to, you know, help me here or if I go and speak to this person, you know, they're going to help me get through what I'm feeling'. Because for them all, they have feelings are so big and scary. You know, they don't know what all that is going on and to not have the vocabulary or the language, to voice that, you know, it's a lot."

(Teacher)

2.2.3 Whole-family approach

The final key trauma-informed approach embedded within Fane Street is based on the premise that the whole family needs to be supported, rather than simply focusing on the child alone. This has been a key concern in the school, and both the school leadership and staff we interviewed see their family support structure as one of the main strengths of the school, with the school perceived as playing a pivotal community resource role:

"Another key element of which is where [Newcomer Support Coordinator] comes in... we actually believe in working with the whole family rather than the child. If the child is not being supported at home, isn't getting their basic needs met, they're never going to succeed in their education."

(Principal)

"From my point of view, we've always over the last number of years very much been of the opinion that you can't support the child without supporting the whole family. We're very much about community in the school and school in the community. We are the sort of trusted partner for our families in terms of being their place of refuge, their safe place... (...) we understand that if the parents aren't happy and, you know, they're not happy with where their child is and what they're currently going through, then the child's not in a position to learn, physically or mentally. So we want to do it... A, because it's the right thing to do but B, because it's the only way we're actually going to be able to make the children be in a position to be able to learn."

(Vice-Principal)

"So we're always looking at... not just the child, but the child through a lens. You know, in terms of the whole family, what's going on there, are they struggling? And I think that's something that we do really well here, not just focused on the child, but bringing in all aspects of the child's life."

(Teacher)

This whole-family approach **starts from enrolment** when parents and children come through the doors of the school for the first time. Enrolments occur most days of the school year due to the transient nature of the pupil population as many families are asylum seekers or are required to move accommodation due to their volatile situations. During the enrolment meeting, parents are encouraged to bring their children with them, so staff can informally get a sense of the child's needs and characteristics (e.g., how they interact with others, etc.), and they can also meet their class teacher on the same day. However, children only start their first formal day of school on a Tuesday, so the class teacher has had time (on Mondays) to prepare for the new arrival. From the moment the child is enrolled, families are welcomed into the school community, treated with care and understanding, and provided with practical and emotional support (e.g., children are given a school uniform on enrolment day). Given the traumatised backgrounds and precarious situation of many of these children and families, efforts are made to ensure school is experienced as a 'safe place' for both child and family where relational trust can be built:

"I would say a couple of years ago, really, we started to get the families from the asylum system coming in. So families who were living in hotel situations where, you know, you might have four or five people to a room and just really cramped, inappropriate living conditions, they might be there for months, months and end, you know, 6-9 months a year even in some cases. And yeah, I would do the enrolments with them, and you can see them like visibly distressed, you know. Some of them are in tears, um... they're confused, disorientated. They've just had, you know, you may be talking about several sort of processing meetings with the Home Office. They've got to meet this person, that person, they're getting asked all these questions. They're getting asked for their ID constantly. You know, if you think about it from their point of view, it's so stressful, you know, and nobody's really... nobody's listening to them. Nobody's actually really showing them any kind of human empathy or concern that, you know, that they might be in a really difficult place. So I guess you can either, you've got a choice really there, you can just go 'Right. Well, I just need to

get this paperwork done and get this child enrolled', or you can go, 'Right. Let's try and meet this person where they are and think about... right, how can we build trust with you and show you this is a safe place for you actually, and that we're not going to treat you the way that the Home Office is treating you and that other agencies might be sort of treating you', and just build it from there"

(Newcomer Support Coordinator, currently on temporary secondment)

"...quite often...we're maybe the first people that have actually given them a bit of time, offered them a tea or coffee and sort of... maybe they've come in thinking it's going to be more formal process than what it is. You know, we like to remove the airs and graces and, you know, give them a cup of tea or coffee, help them get enrolled, and they very quickly see that we are very much set up to support them, not just their child."

(Vice-Principal)

This **relationship-building process with child and parent** is thought to 'start at the front door' with the school 'ready' to make a positive 'difference from the word go':

"It starts at the front door. You know, it really does... from the minute they come in. Increasingly now ... (...) It would be an e-mail that would come first of all, sometimes... from outside agencies that know about the work that goes on in the school. So they would set up an appointment... a lot of information is captured at that stage in terms of the journey, yeah. (...) And it's the journey they've been through... the child is with [the adult] that's going to enrol, because you learn a lot from watching, from observing them, you know, how are they playing, how are they interacting with others, how are they interacting with their parents, how are they interacting with me, somebody they don't know. So you learn an awful lot and, you know, it's time well spent. It's a lot of work, you know, we would have enrolments on most days... There's... usually one every day throughout the year... the turnover of pupils is huge. (...) it's being ready to make that difference from the word go..."

(Vice-Principal)

“And it’s even a couple of things like whenever they come in for the interview, we will give them a new uniform, so they don’t have to worry about getting the school uniform or anything like that. We have been funded, we’ve been very, very fortunate that we’ve received funding from external agencies.”

(Principal)

This **practical support** comes in a wide range of forms, including providing clothes and heat, a school food bank, referrals to other support agencies and signposting. For example, a dedicated Family Support Officer helps families fill out forms on Tuesdays and organises classes for parents in the afternoons. In addition, the Newcomer Support Coordinator (and the Vice-Principal) performs a key advocacy role, making phone calls and writing emails on families’ behalf (e.g., registering families with a GP). First time appointments are sometimes arranged in the dedicated family room in the school at school pick-up time in order to facilitate parent attendance. Indeed, having a room dedicated to family support, with ‘an open-door policy on a Tuesday’, has enabled the flourishing of a family support ‘hub’, as expressed by one of the staff in the quote below:

“... prior to the parents’ room, there was hardly any parents came over the door. Since we launched that parents’ room, um really, there’s a whole hub that goes on, on a Tuesday (...) So there’s like Barnardos have held like English classes for the parents. (...) they help them with forms like transfer forms (...) they help them fill those out, free school meals, uniform grants and things like that. (...) before that, it was hardly anything. Now, I mean, because it’s kind of an open-door policy on a Tuesday. I mean, there’s, there’s all sorts goes on in there”

(Teacher)

“In terms of working with the families then I suppose list a few other things (...) there’s a food bank, there’s referrals to other agencies and signposting. Um... there is almost a kind of casework approach as well. I would take certain things on, and [the Family Support Worker] would do as well, or we’re making phone calls, emails on people’s behalf. We had a good referral relationship with [name of organisation], they have an advocacy service and we know about ‘Advocacy for all’.”

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

The family service also provides an essential support to teachers, so they can seek support for families when they notice children are ‘struggling’ in some way:

“We would just look for, I guess, trends. Um... you know, if a child hasn’t got a snack or you know was really struggling with maybe hygiene or something like that, we would approach the family. (...) we do, you know on a weekly basis give out bags of food to families as well.... We’ve got a whole room dedicated to, you know, uniforms and clothing and shoes and coats and things like that.”

(Teacher)

Indeed, a whole family support structure has been built to support families, in **collaboration with partner agencies**. This includes:

- Newcomer Support Coordinator (full time)
- Dedicated Family Support Officer (30 hpw)
- Intercultural Education Service (IES) Roma and Asylum Seeker and Refugee (ASR) Support Officer
- Incredible Years (on a Thursday)
- Acacia¹ Path English Classes for Parents
- CASA and LORAG² Family Support Hub
- Trussell Trust Foodbank
- Storehouse³
- The Windsor Fund⁴
- Family referrals to outside agencies

¹ Acacia Path is a Christian-based organisation that runs English language projects in a number of locations across the Belfast area for newcomers living in the community.

² CASA and LORAG are names for different Family Support Hubs: CASA covers Windsor, Blackstaff, Finaghy, Malone, Musgrave and Upper Malone Wards, and LORAG manages the South Belfast, a family support hub which covers the Ormeau Road area from city centre to Belvoir.

³ Storehouse was formed by Belfast City Vineyard Church. They provide food, clothes and furniture for those in need

⁴ When external agencies donate money to the school to help families, it is placed into a ringfenced fund named The Windsor Fund by the Board of Governors. The name comes from the local area and from the Church who made the first donation: Windsor Baptist Church.

This family support structure has benefitted from partnership building with other agencies, e.g. Inspire, Barnardo's, South Belfast Food Bank, etc. Thus, the school works closely with a lot of charities, who provide support for the families in the school. For example, Acacia Path holds English classes for parents, the Incredible Years programme on a Thursday, as well as events for families in the school, that include cookery demonstrations, when parents are given recipe books and other free products. While some events may be targeted at newcomer families, others are open to all the families in the school. Inter-agency collaboration, therefore, is considered a key enabler, as further explained in the Enablers and Barriers section:

"I think a successful approach for me is about bringing in as many partner agencies and things as you can as well, and using the school as that base, because... so, so many times I've made referrals and nothing happens with them because (...) the agency might phone the person back in about three days. By that point, best will in the world, the parents have got a lot of going on. (...) they've forgotten basically, or they're getting a phone call, they don't know what it's about, or they don't want to answer the phone because they don't know who it is. Do you know what I mean? Whereas a very simple thing, like just going right, we'll arrange... I'll arrange the meeting. I'll not refer them. I'll arrange for them to come here, and they'll meet them in the family room at 3:00 o'clock, when they're picking the child."

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

"That event that Barnardos had was very good, where they had all the families in, and they showed them how to cook healthy meals and it actually gave every family who took part a £20 Sainsbury's voucher, so they could go and get some shopping, and they did draws for air fryers, and it was a real success because the families loved it. ... there was a real buzz about the environment. (...) It was a really successful event and you know, there was... a lot of our families came. It wasn't just even the newcomer families, the asylum seekers, the local families came too and took part in it and enjoyed it."

(Nurture Assistant)

Many of these families require not only practical but also emotional support due to the extreme adversities they have experienced. As a result, therapeutic work (based in the school) with families has commenced this year. In addition, 'calm plans' are provided not just for children but for whole families. Some teaching staff also mentioned how teachers would check in with siblings whenever there is a particular issue with a child to try and understand the whole family situation, and be able to provide more effective support:

"Apart from having a school counsellor who we bring in as well, we have this year, (...) [name of therapist] is coming in to do therapeutic work with families. So she's actually working with parents and children to work through their trauma."

(Principal)

"I think our main strength is in the fact that we support the whole family. [The Nurture teacher] has been known to actually write calm plans for parents as well as children. I think it's... because we're supporting the whole family, then it's filtering from the parent to the child as well. And because they feel cared for and they feel that we're listening to them, then they're more likely to encourage the child to behave better in school."

(Principal)

"If there's something wrong with one particular child, I think we're very good then searching like the siblings, if there's siblings, and going and checking up on the siblings as well as the child who's maybe in crisis, just to see if there's a bigger picture than just this one particular child. And I think we're quite good at dealing with that and we all know such and such has a brother here or sister there, and we would go and search out the whole picture."

(Nurture Assistant)

Finally, it is worth mentioning how **cultural, religious and ethnic diversity is celebrated** in the school environment, with the celebration of festivals, etc. Focus group participants spoke of how beneficial this is for the whole pupil population and the staff. Despite the many cultural and other differences represented in the student population, the staff talked about the 'Fane Street family', with the family support services and celebratory events helping to engender a strong sense of community

within the whole school, using phrases such as “we’re all together and we’re all in this together”:

“I think it just creates a sense of community for them. Umm, you know, it is like a community, you know and everybody knows each other’s faces. And then we have all these things that then helps, you know, integrate our parents into our community and our family as well. (...) I think that’s something we’re really good at, is building positive relationships with both the kids and with their family, so that they know, you know, that we are here to help, and even if we are going with something negative, you know, it is because we want to help them and yeah, we want the best for them and their children.”

(Teacher)

“We really celebrate ... all different types of kind of festivals and religions and everything. I think when you do that, it just is a natural, a natural kind of occurrence. We celebrate Christmas. Last week we were celebrating Diwali, and things like that, and I think when you have that, the kids are just interested, you know, and that’s a norm around here, you know, celebrating each other’s cultures and talking about religions and different festivals.”

(Teacher)

2.3 Enablers, Barriers and Challenges

Participants in the focus groups identified a range of enablers, barriers and challenges to the implementation of the various trauma-informed initiatives throughout the school, a summary of which is provided in the table below.

Table 2.2: Enablers and Barriers/Challenges

Enablers	Barriers/Challenges
Leadership drive and vision	High turnover of pupils/transient pupil intake
Key agents of change / champions / role models	Emotional toll to staff – risk of burnout
Collective vision	Large class sizes
Supportive staff culture – close team with a whole team approach	Lack of external recognition of the importance of the non-academic work the school does
Supportive management	Limited resources and time
Management having realistic expectations of staff and trusting staff to do the right thing	Lack of understanding from other services (e.g. health service hard to engage with; as well as institutional racism)
Staff buy-in (motivation, commitment, involvement and investment)	Difficulties to engage families with little English
Staff training	
Collaboration – building partnerships with external organisations	
Using school environment as central base/resource	
Adequate Resources	
A common trauma-informed language to support understanding of relevance and inter-agency working	

Enablers

Leadership drive was seen as a key enabler of any initiative. As the Newcomer Support Coordinator explained, you need ‘key people to lead’ in order for people to really understand and think about the difference they can make in their everyday work:

“... you need key people to lead that forward, and that’s how you’ll have successful system change. What won’t work is that if you go out to every school and say you’ve now got to be trauma informed and there’s no champion for that, because people just go ‘well, what does that mean?’ ... people have to understand, you have to really get to them. You know, you have to get right into their heart, really, and get them to think about how they carry out their day-to-day work because that that’s what makes the system kind of roll forward.”

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

Connected to that, some participants noted that as well as the Principal and Vice-Principal, there were **other key agents of change or champions**, such as the nurture teacher, who acted as role models for all the staff. Through this whole school approach, it was thought that everyone’s ‘mindset’ changed in ways that influenced all the interactions with the children and their parents:

“if we zoom out slightly, think about the systems aspect of it that you’re talking about. So (...) what is the system? The system is people really. And so to kind of influence and change any system, you’ve got to change the way people are thinking about the jobs and how they’re carrying out their jobs. And to me that... (...) it’s about ethos and values really. And what I suppose what we’ve done is we’ve noted really that maybe the old operating model, the traditional operating model wasn’t really working for this cohort, wasn’t working for our community anymore. So, so we had to change the way we were doing things and you’ve got to... to really do that, you need people like [the nurture teach] who’s been like a role model basically for other staff members in the way he interacts with children, the way he carries out his day-to-day work... I would say like the leadership we’ve all provided has kind of had that knock-on-effect on

other staff and (...) not just on the teaching staff, all the staff in the school, and I think it gradually over time that mindset sort of seeps into everywhere, into everybody. And so everybody’s then changing how they’re interacting with the kids and with the parents that come into the building.”

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

Through the focus groups, it became apparent that the ethos of trauma-informed approaches had ‘seeped’ into the **school culture**. As staff bought into the leadership vision and contributed or became involved in the different initiatives, a collective vision was engendered, with staff feeling that they were ‘all on board’:

“But in terms of the ethos of the school, to have the staff sit down and to think, you know, to say, ‘here’s where we’re at and this is where we want to be and we’re all on board, we’re all on the same train, going the same direction’.”

(Teacher)

This was also reinforced by a sense of community and a supportive staff culture, where all staff members supported each other, ‘checked in’ with each other, ‘looked out for each other’, with staff encouraged to seek support rather than ‘sink or struggle’ alone. There was a strong sense of a whole team approach, and as expressed by the previous quote, all staff worked together towards the same aims, i.e., to support and serve the pupils and their families. This was further encouraged through good team communication with staff perceived to have ‘grown together’:

“We’re actually quite a tight team in that we do rely quite a lot on each other, because we get quite traumatised with some of the things that we hear as well, and we were offered support last year, and we said, ‘No, we’d rather that went to the children because we support each other’. So the staff have grown together”

(Principal)

“That sense of community that if a child does come and is really challenging, that is going to challenge the member of staff, the member of staff is going to find teaching really tricky because of what they’re bringing in their history, the member of staff knows that it’s not for them in their class just to sink and struggle with this child’s behaviour. They know that there’s a team, so they know that they can go to myself, the nurture teacher or their ‘English as an additional language’ teachers or to [the Principal].”

(Nurture Teacher)

“And we’re quite good, if we know someone is going through a tough day, we would always check in, you know, if you’ve been involved in that, can you come and help me? Like is everything OK? Are you OK? You know, we’re quite good at talking with each other and supporting each other. (...) this is my (...) third year, there’s never been a day when something hasn’t happened, you know, it could be very minor, or unfortunately it can be very major, but we all know, and we’ve just, we talk, we have good communication and we all just sort of look out for each other. It just sort of happens.”

(Nurture Assistant)

In addition, as explained by the Principal, staff were committed and invested, as they could see how this way of working was making a difference, thus igniting **staff motivation**:

“So the staff have grown together (...) even just by going into the nurture room, you know, simple things like that, they would go in and say have breakfast with the children, seeing that and seeing the difference in the children has made a huge difference to our staff and it’s just the whole ethos of the school.”

(Principal)

Other key enablers had to do with the **characteristics of the leadership**, in particular, the Principal and Vice-Principal, who were reported as being accommodating and supportive to staff (having an open-door policy, etc.), with staff feeling listened to, their ideas valued, and concerns taken seriously and addressed. In addition, senior staff were reported as having realistic expectations of staff with ‘trust’ featuring as an important element of staff relationships. Staff

reported that they felt trusted to make the right decisions and do the right thing, as well as feeling supported in their efforts. Thus, a **mutuality of respect**, contribution and purpose was created where difficult issues could be aired in a ‘safe space’:

“I think what’s not been mentioned is trust as well. Because [the Principal and Vice-Principal] as well, whenever we set up the Sunshine Room, they gave me the room, [the Principal] sent me on the training, and I said, ‘[name of Principal], if you want me to do this properly, want me to set up the room properly, I’m going to need a month out of class to get this room sorted, to get the systems in place so that when the children come to me, we’re 100% ready, the children are coming walking into a place that’s 100% ready to cater for them’. [They] said, ‘Take as long as you need. I trust you, I sent you on the training and I know it’ll be good’. And we’ve always had that. You know she’s not over my shoulder. We have meetings about um..., nurture panel meetings, where we discuss certain children. It’s on me to set that up. [The Principal] is not saying ‘come and tell me how it’s going and I need a deadline’. I say, ‘[name of Principal] can we meet? I’d like to share’. She says, ‘perfect’. She has great trust in her professionals to do what you know what is expected. Now, that’s not you’re left on your own to do it. You’re supported if needs be but you’re trusted to do.”

(Nurture Teacher)

“I honestly think we’re very good informally, just going and having a chat. I mean, and the principal’s doors always open. And..., the vice principal as well, you know, anybody that has a problem or a moan, we go and we do that, and I certainly feel that I’m listened to, when I have a problem, when I pass it on, or if I have a... um an idea about something, I certainly feel that it’s... and it’s not just, you know, listened to, it’s implemented, it’s talked about, and it’s kind of... you bounce back and forth between the couple of members of staff and then the next thing it happens, you know, it’s really, it’s... You feel, you feel like you are listened to...”

(Teacher)

“[Senior staff] definitely give you opportunities as well to come forward and say, ‘look, you know, this maybe isn’t working as well or maybe... could we try this?’, and have ideas like that, and having a space, safe space to talk as a staff team, you know, about things. Because it is hard, you know, you know it’s hard going sometimes, so you do need to have a good relationship with each other to get each other through it, you know.”

(Teacher)

As previously mentioned, collaboration and building **partnerships with external organisations** was deemed as a crucial enabler, particularly in terms of supporting the families. Central to this was using the school environment as a ‘base’, a central resource, with support coming into the school to attend to staff wellbeing as well as the needs of the children and families:

“So I think it’s about bringing support into the school as a base and making use of the resources, other resources that are in your community, other assets that you’ve got to kind of draw from. That is what successful model will look like because... while it’s great that we did all this stuff, it’s very hard on our resources and our time and, you know, you’ve got to think about sort of staff wellbeing and all the rest of it as well. So I think a successful approach for me is about bringing in as many partner agencies and things as you can as well, and using the school as that base.”

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

Training was also considered very useful so staff could feel better equipped and confident in their practice and have a better understanding of the issues. In other words, as expressed by a staff member, it reassured them that they were ‘on the right track’:

“Something else that helps is definitely the training that that the school, that [the Principal and VP] have organized. It’s definitely good to have that behind you. I mean, we could sit and chat here all we want about our experiences, but actually having that behind us, and the theory behind everything, really helps to kind of match everything up, to make sure, ‘oh, this, I am doing this right.’ You know, it gives you a bit of... you’re on the right track, sort of.”

(Teacher)

There was a recognition in the focus groups that **adequate resources**, although not deemed essential to start implementation, were nonetheless important and helped trauma-informed initiatives develop. In this case, the extra funding the school received for the newcomer children was used thoughtfully, creatively and efficiently by school management to bring about their vision:

“We get extra money for the newcomer children that we have. (...) because we’ve such a high number, we thought, right, how are we going to use this money best for the children that it’s aimed at? So initially we started off by having extra support where the children were out of class. So we have a really comprehensive system now. (...) So we then thought, well, so what else can we do because we have so much trauma coming in? And then we thought, well, nurture was something that we’d always sort of fancied and toyed about with because of the indigenous children that we had. And I looked at the budget and said, right, OK, let’s do this.”

(Principal)

“Resourcing is huge for this as well. I mean, it’s money in terms of all the equipment for calm corners and bubble rooms and sensory, you know, even the nurture unit like, you know, all the training, it’s all money at the end of the day.”

(Teacher)

Finally, the last enabler noted by participants was the use of the **trauma-informed language**, which, although considered ‘still in its infancy’, was found useful in two respects: 1) ‘to get it across to’ governors or ‘the slightly more resistant’ staff; and 2) to bring different settings/ sectors ‘out of their silos’:

“I think to get to get it across to the likes of our governors or to maybe the slightly more resistant staff (...) it’s actually given them a raison d’etre, because you’re actually saying ‘well look, this is brain development, this, these are basic things that happen’. So they can see a reason for it (...) with some staff, they needed a little (...) more persuasion... So I think actually seeing that there was reasoning behind it made it more to our staff.”

(Principal)

“From my point of view, it’s helped us sort of from a networking point of view (...) in the vast majority of cases, we know who to pick the phone up and speak to now, because we’ve worked hard to develop those relationships, you know, we know there’s a problem in this area or that area. We know who to pick the phone up to. (...) I think it’s helping bring trauma informed practices used in all those areas... health, justice, education. It’s helping, it’s bringing them closer together. ... It’s bringing us out of our silos and that’s what we need to do so.”

(Vice-Principal)

Barriers and Challenges

Participants in both focus groups identified a range of challenges and barriers to trauma-informed implementation in their particular school environment. Firstly, the **high turnover of pupils** (or transient pupil intake) was seen as a challenge for two key reasons: 1) in terms of limitations on what can be achieved for individual children who are only in the school for a few weeks or months; and 2) difficulties for staff teaching in their classroom, as it takes time to work out how to help each individual child and meet their needs. This was thought to take its toll on teachers who needed support to manage their energy. In addition, participants argued that a re-conceptualisation of child outcomes beyond traditional academic achievement was needed to understand how the important preliminary work achieved by the school was enabling children to be in a position to engage with learning:

“... the turnover of our pupils is huge (...) we would have over 50% of our children, you know, the cohort would change by that amount every year, you know, from September to June, but some of them might only be with us for three or four months, and it can be very, very difficult if we’re pushed, you know, on paper, how do you sell that you’ve actually made an impact on that child, and it can be something as simple as, you know, their head was on the floor. They were really, really not in a good position. But they’re now, they’re happier, they’re confident, and they maybe leave school, but what we’ve done is actually prepare them to learn, you know, ..., they may not be reading yet or they may not be doing this

or that, or they may not have moved from a level 2 to a Level 3 in literacy, but what we have done is fill their cup, if you like, or fill their jug, you know, or fill their bucket, whatever analogy you want to use, to enable them to learn.”

(Vice-Principal)

“... intake at school is very..., you know, very transient. I think last year it was nearly 50%. So that’s very very tricky, because whenever you get a child and, you know, you’re waiting to have them assessed um... in the class, um... you know you’re trying, you don’t know what the trauma is necessarily. So you’re trying out different things, and if that’s not working, I mean you do kind of start to tear your hair out, like how can I help this child? What is going on? Um... you’re trying the best as you can. And then the next thing you know, maybe you do get somewhere, and then they leave, and then you get two more kids like that. So it’s kind of like... you’re flogging a dead horse sometimes, but you just keep going because that child in front of you, at that moment, needs your help, you know.”

(Teacher)

“And then you also have the issue where they go back to their own countries for a long period of time, so the work that you have done in class, you’ve built up this lovely level of getting them to where they need to be, and then they maybe disappear for 2-3 months and then all that work goes, and they come back with having no schooling and maybe in their country, maybe experiencing more trauma, then they come back to us, and it’s like starting again, and you just have to pick up and you know that that’s also, you know, difficult too.”

(Nurture Assistant)

Thus, considering the situations and characteristics of a large majority of the pupil population, one of the challenges flagged by the Vice-Principal is to encourage education bodies (e.g., ETI and EA) to recognise and **value the important preparatory work** that the school undertakes with such pupils and families. While this work may not be focused purely on academic development, it is nonetheless considered critical for children’s engagement with learning:

“I would put that down as one of the challenges (...) ETI will come back. (...) But again, you’re banking on people on the outside, again, realising that excellence and outstanding teachers look different in different places because, you know, if they come in here and they’re looking for, ‘OK, give me top, middle and bottom literacy books and numeracy books from every class’, they will see good work, don’t get me wrong, but we would rather be showcasing the outstanding work that we’re doing that’s just sits in a different department, and that has to be, that has to be held up and valued as much as the academic side, because our children aren’t there yet to do that, academically, it doesn’t mean they won’t be in two years or four years. But we’re playing a really important part in their journey, and it needs to be recognised.”

(Vice-Principal)

Limited resources and time was also identified as a central barrier or challenge to TIA implementation:

“We can’t do everything, because we’ve got limited resource and we’ve got a particular remit as well.”

(Newcomer Support Coordinator)

An additional challenge mentioned by various focus group participants was regarding **the impact of the work on the emotional wellbeing of staff**. Everyone recognised that although the work the school did was very ‘rewarding’, it was also ‘emotionally draining’, in particular due to the traumatic experiences the pupils and their families had endured and the challenging nature of some behavioural presentations. Staff noted how they worried about their pupils and their families and how this, in turn, often affected their own emotional wellbeing. School management recognised that staff burnout was a risk, but countered this by being mindful of the importance of staff wellbeing in the support processes offered. While staff noted these inevitable challenges, as previously mentioned, they also reported feeling supported by the senior management team in providing this high level of care:

“... when you’re working with children who have experienced trauma, you know, it can be hard going for you knowing, you know, sometimes what that child or that family is going through or has went

through, you know, it could be quite emotionally draining sometimes. I think when you really look at it and understand wow, you know, that’s unbelievable that that’s actually real life and happened to somebody and they’re standing there in front of you. And also you know when a school environment, you know the behaviours and stuff as well, you know, sometimes can be very challenging and it could be hard, you know, when you’re trying to ... meet somebody’s needs and find out what that behaviour’s about, but also teach the rest of your class.”

(Teacher)

“You can sometimes take on some of the trauma and think about it a lot, you know, it can affect mental health at times, like I’ve had times last year, especially, where I’ve gone home and maybe have a sleepless night, you know, a lot of sleepless nights, thinking is that child going to be OK? And it costs you a lot of money because some of the kids don’t have the basic things and you say, ‘ohh, such and such would like that. I’m gonna buy that for the room’. And you know, you invest so much of you in the children, it can drain also.”

(Nurture Assistant)

Large class sizes were also identified by the staff group as a key challenge to provide this level of nurturing care, especially when many children in one class have complex needs:

“... the class sizes, just whenever you have so many kids needing so many different things from you, you are only one person. Um... class sizes have to be kept to a certain, certain level. I mean, we are pushed, you know, to our limits. We really, really are. (...) like I have 24 in my room, which is so lovely. I’m almost afraid to say it because, but then it would be like ohh, you’ve got room, right? but actually last year I had 32, you know, which was very, very challenging and a real strain on mental health, you know, it really, really is.”

(Teacher)

When asked about implementation barriers and challenges, the Principal also mentioned the difficulties in engaging particularly with the health service, with experiences of institutional racism noted as common among the families in the school:

“One of the barriers for me is that the families are still encountering racism within other services in Northern Ireland, which will remain nameless. So that’s a huge barrier for us. We have been fighting for years. We want to get health on board. I am more than happy to facilitate health appointments and things like that here, but people just don’t seem to. I don’t know whether they’re just not interested or whether there’s not the manpower or whether there’s not the money or, you know. So that’s a big barrier for us, I think. (...) Yes, yes, but we have experience of that and we find that, say [Vice-Principal] rings up and says we need to register this person with a GP, they get registered, whereas when they rang themselves, they didn’t... (...) So unfortunately, there’s, there’s still a lot of racism out there that we’re really suffering from.”

(Principal)

Staff also mentioned difficulties in engaging with families when parents’ understanding of the English language is poor with challenges reported when using translators:

“But it is difficult to connect with the parents because a lot of these parents don’t have English, a good understanding of English. So during our parent meeting week, we make sure they have translators and things like that. (...) sometimes we use those phone translators if we need to talk to parents, but they’re not always great. (...) sometimes the kids have to then translate (...), which is not ideal either.”

(Teacher)

2.4 Outcomes and Perceived Benefits

According to focus groups participants, Fane Street’s trauma informed approaches did work, and there were numerous indicators that testified to that. The school management and staff mentioned a range of **benefits and positive outcomes for the children and their families**. However, they recognised it was challenging to evidence the myriad of small but critically important outcomes that assist children move toward a place where they can start to engage with learning. Examples of benefits and positive outcomes included children settling in school and being ‘prepared to learn’; changing their behaviours to those that are helpful to them; increasing their confidence and self-esteem; and feeling heard and understood:

“But the most important thing to know is that it works. You know, our children are from very difficult backgrounds, and we have children that can come in and display behaviours of trauma, of aggression, of violence of... real nervous responses and we work with them, and they slot in and they manage to get an education. Now that education might not be (...) they’re doing straight A’s and going off to [grammar school]. For them, it might be that they’ve learnt to read and write, but they’ve been in the school, they’ve managed to change their behaviour to a behaviour that will serve them better in the community leaving our school. So it works. That’s the real important point, it does help children change their lives. It does get them settled.”

(Nurture Teacher)

“There’s a very clear difference whenever we switched that policy from punishment-based to positive behaviour, there is no doubt that there was a huge, huge difference, in terms of the child’s ... confidence, their self-esteem, you know, their learning process of all of that emotional literacy and building upon that, giving them a voice, you know, all of that has been really, really beneficial. And I think the kids in here, I personally think they feel heard, and they feel listened to, and they feel like if there is a problem, the teacher will listen and do something about it.”

(Teacher)

Many examples of positive indicators were expressed by focus group participants and also provided in school documents (see Figure 2.3), as families expressed their gratitude to the school. However, as previously mentioned, it was difficult to evidence the progress the school had made in traditional measurable terms, and difficult to record the numerous ‘small wins’ that their involvement had made to pupils and their families:

“We’ve actually got a child who’s rejoined us this morning... a child from the local area that was at [another] school, [...] and couldn’t settle, left in September, and has come back to us today. And I spoke to the mother this morning and we’re giving the lad a check in... and she says, [...] ‘in the other school, he was treated as...’ he has problems, he said this morning’. You see the lad, he worries. You check him in and you’re making sure he’s alright and that. That really is us in a nutshell. We know this boy so well, we know his background. (...) And he had to leave and move for, you know, family circumstances. But it speaks volumes that although they still live in [another area of Belfast], they’re driving all the way to come back here to us because they know that the lad will settle, they know we’ll look after him and they know we care.”

(Nurture Teacher)

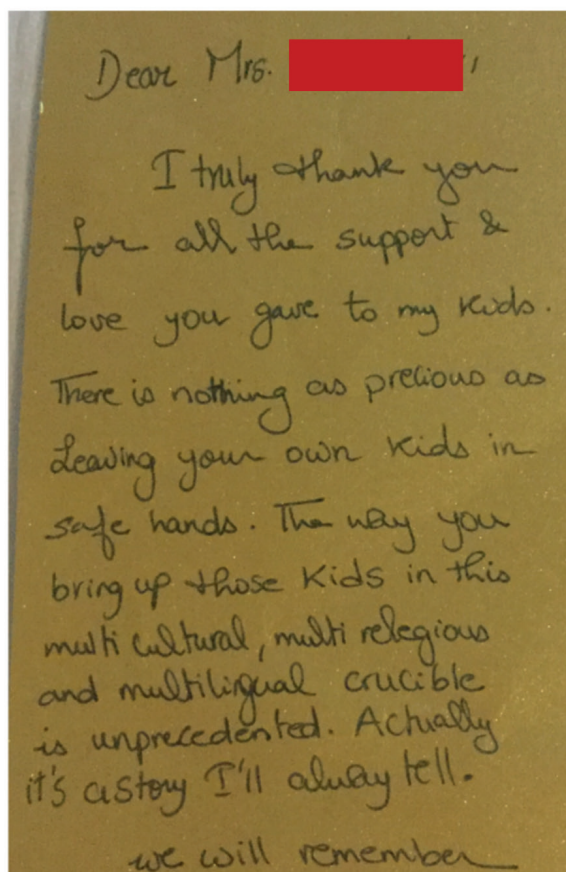
“I have a parent at the moment, (...) the family are the most traumatised family (...) and she was really distressed. (...) She was really distressed one morning a couple of weeks ago, and I sat down and I didn’t even know if I was doing the right thing, and I just rubbed her back, and (...) well you offered her a cup of tea, and we got her a glass of water and everything, and she would never have met my eye before. And I think that was cultural. She didn’t want to meet the eye of somebody who was older than her. And since I did that, she has checked in with me. She smiles at me every morning. She makes sure she speaks to me. She now sees me as a trusted person, and that’s what it’s all about, that you have won the trust of somebody (...) they know that you’re there to help them, and that for me, that’s the job satisfaction. It’s not the awards, which we have won (...) That’s absolutely lovely. But it’s little things like that, or an e-mail last week to say that this girl’s child who was screaming and just absolutely horrendous six months ago is now wanting to stay in school and now wanting to play with other children.”

(Principal)

“It’s a... a wee boy (...) who is now in P5, he was rolling about the corridors in P1. There was just nothing we could do with them and now, with the feelings thermometer that we have rolled out throughout the school, he can now come and say to me, ‘[name of Principal] I’m a three’, and I know exactly where he’s at. He doesn’t have to say I’m feeling really bad. My sister annoyed me this morning. We know straight away and he is, he’s just such a different wee boy. But that’s not something we can tangibly record. We just see that.”

(Principal)

Figure 2.3. Letter from former pupil's family to Principal (provided by Principal)



Dear Mrs [redacted]

I truly thank you for all the support & love you gave to my kids. There is nothing as precious as leaving your own kids in safe hands. The way you bring up these kids in this multicultural, multi-religious and multilingual crucible is unprecedented. Actually, it's a story I'll always tell.

We will remember

It was also argued that the benefits of TIAs were not just for pupils and their families, but they were also felt for staff, in terms of **job satisfaction** which in turn led to staff retention. Some staff that participated in the focus groups talked about feeling 'privileged'.

"It is a tough station because you could go in and sit in any middle-class school, get your outcomes, earn your money, and go home and forget about it in the evening. But that's not what we're about... and it's the job satisfaction. I don't want to be anywhere else." (Principal)

"Staff are now tending to stay because they love it. Now I think, [name of staff member] was starting to burn out. So I would say burnout is a risk with us. But at the same time, the satisfaction that we are getting from what we are doing, and it's the small wins."

(Principal)

"And it is tough, but I feel like we learn from our children every day. They teach us so many things and I feel privileged to work... with them and help them, because we do learn so much from them"

(Nurture Assistant)

2.5 School vision and priorities

Participants in the school management focus group were asked about their future vision for the school. Their wishes were varied, and included a social worker; a better relationship with responsive health services; to become a 'community hub' for their families, i.e. a 'one-stop-shop' for some vulnerable parents (e.g., refugee families) where services could come to them; and to expand the family work they are already doing:

"I want a social worker. I wanted one for ages. I want a social worker."

(Vice-Principal)

"We want to be a community hub for our families. We would really love to expand what we're doing. I don't know how realistic it is with funding, but we would like to be... and we would like to be involved with health. We would like to be a one-stop-shop for some of our parents. You know, rather than the refugee families who can't afford to get a bus up to the Royal or whatever, that they can come in here where they know us, where they trust us. They can get their physio appointments, they can get their, you know, their speech and language appointments, all that sort of thing. You know, just a community hub. I suppose [this] is what the school would have been in the country many years ago. So it's kind of going back to old-fashioned."

(Principal)

2.6 Lessons learned

Focus group participants were also asked what advice they would have for other schools embarking on implementing trauma informed approaches in their school environment. Responses were varied. The importance of **building relationships with the pupils and the families** was highlighted across both focus groups:

"My one word, my one word, would just be relationships, because everything we've said is all people-based. It's all relationships, but it has to be. You have to mean it. You know it's about relationships."

(Vice-Principal)

"I would say building relationships with the kids is number 1. And yes, listening to them, yeah, listen to their needs,... build relationships with them."

(Teacher)

"I was just going to say what [other teacher] was saying. Definitely, just really getting to know them kids that are coming through your door. Like I said once you know them, you know, it is so helpful for me as a teacher, because I know then what, you know, I need to do or I can be prepared for that for myself. Do you know what I mean?"

(Teacher)

Staff also had more specific advice, in relation to **giving children the tools to be able to learn** and understand their emotions, etc.; the importance of **consistency and a whole school approach**; and (if possible) **reducing class sizes**:

"Put the tools in place. Put them on the walls for them to see, you know, build that emotional and expressive language, so that they do understand..."

(Teacher)

"And again, like just what we were saying about giving the tools ... for them to learn what all them big feelings are, and the language and all that their stuff."

(Teacher)

“And a whole school approach. Everyone has to know what’s happening... you can go... in this school, we can go into any classroom and it’s the same thing. You know it’s the same... feelings thermometer, calm corner. Everybody talks and we’re all using the same language all the time (...) And it’s different in every class actually, you know. Consistency does not mean exactly the same throughout the school. It’s actually different, but it’s the values and the morals in behind it, the message in behind it, is the same.”

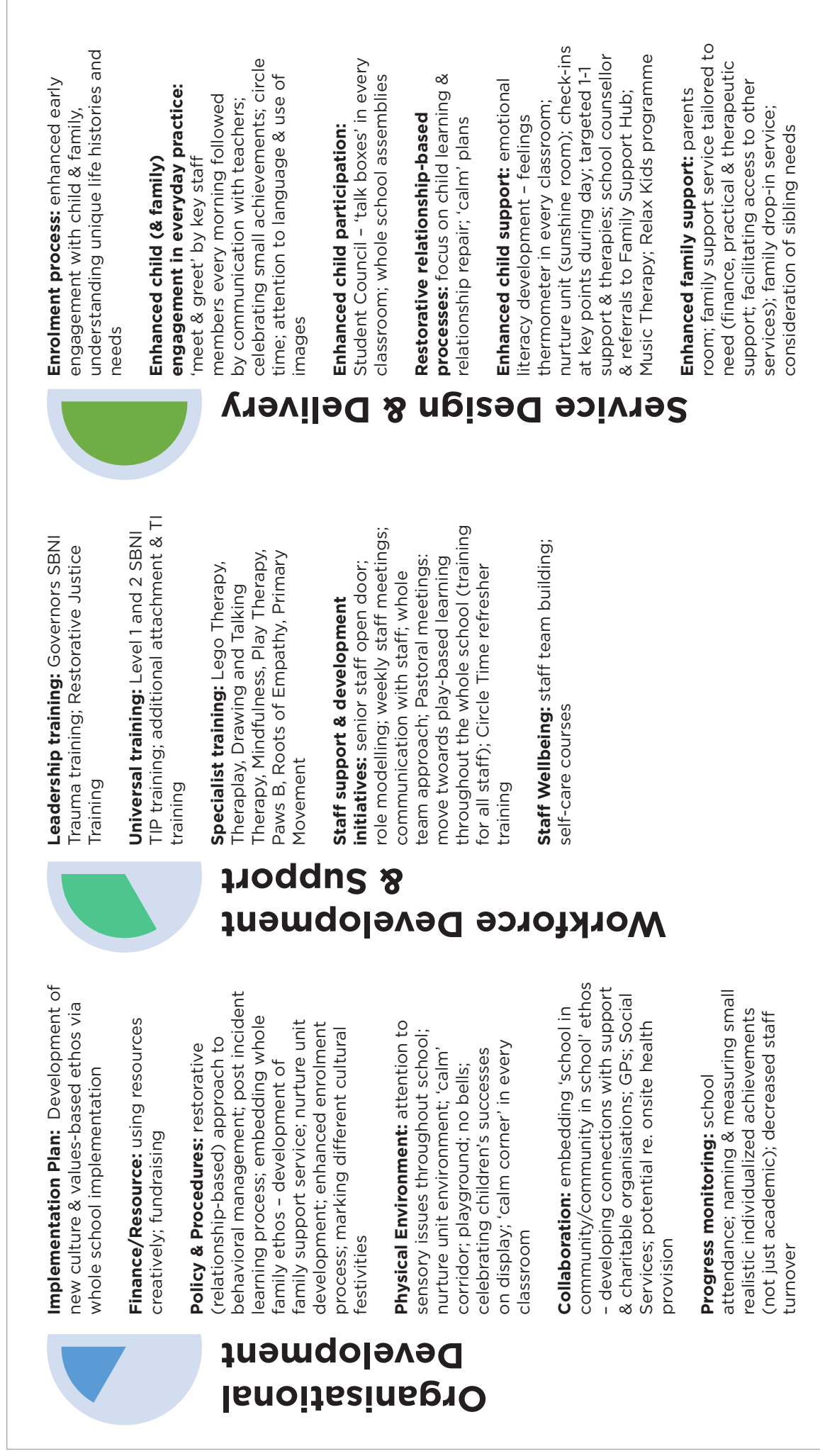
(Teacher)

“if I was saying to another school, the class sizes, the class sizes, just whenever you have so many kids needing so many different things from you, you are only one person. (...) class sizes have to be kept to a certain, certain level. I mean, we are pushed, you know, to our limits. We really, really are.”

(Teacher)

Some participants in the school management focus group were more personal in their advice. This included **being open and willing to adapt and change their practice** (from what they may have been originally taught in their teacher training); and to use their own negative education experiences as motivation to make a positive difference to children’s lives, so their pupils do not have negative experiences of education.

Figure 2.4: Fane Street Primary School Trauma Informed Implementation



References

Bunting, L., Montgomery, L., Mooney, S., MacDonald, M., Coulter, S., Hayes, D., & Davidson, G. (2019a). *Evidence Review: Developing trauma informed practice in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: SBNI & QUB.

Cole, S. F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). *Helping traumatized children learn: Creating and advocating for trauma sensitive schools*. Boston: Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Hanson, R. F., & Lang, J. (2016). A critical look at trauma-informed care among agencies and systems serving maltreated youth and their families. *Child maltreatment*, 21(2), 95-100.

Mooney, S., Fargas Malet, M., MacDonald, M., O'Neill, D., Walsh, C., Hayes, D. & Montgomery, M. (2024a). *'We are on a journey': Implementing Trauma Informed Approaches in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

Mooney, S., Fargas Malet, M., MacDonald, M., O'Neill, D., Walsh, C., Hayes, D. & Montgomery, M. (2024b). *'We are on a journey': Implementing Trauma Informed Approaches in Northern Ireland*. Executive Summary. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

SAMHSA (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for Trauma-Informed Approach. Available at <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf> [Date accessed 12.1.24]

For further information, please contact:
Dr Suzanne Mooney,
Senior Lecturer Social Work,
Systemic Practice & Family Therapy Programme Director
s.mooney@qub.ac.uk

To cite the full report: Mooney, S., Fargas Malet, M., MacDonald, M., O'Neill, D., Walsh, C., Hayes, D. & Montgomery, M. (2024). *'We are on a journey': Implementing Trauma Informed Approaches in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland

design: conordiverdesign.com



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**



SBNI
Safeguarding Board
for Northern Ireland