

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Westminster
SW1P 3BT

4 March 2021 / 15 March 2021

Dear Mr Williamson,

This is an open letter about changing the emphasis on ‘catch up’ for children and young people returning to school this month.

We are writing to you in relation to the comments that you have recently made in press briefings and in your speech on 1 March 2021 to the FED National Education Summit about wanting children to ‘catch up’. We are writing to you in both a personal and professional capacity, representing the views of many individuals from psychology, education, and mental health backgrounds.

Children and young people have learned so much during the past 12 months, whether this be in school or at home. We must recognise that learning begins with curiosity, which is cultivated when a child feels emotionally and physically safe. To focus on academic catch up immediately creates a greater divide between those who have experienced home environments which have been able to foster learning during the pandemic, and those who have not been able to due to larger traumatic experiences being a part of their everyday life such as poverty, abuse, domestic violence and so on.

We recognise that many children will feel safe upon their return to school, and many will not have experienced previous trauma. However, our thoughts below set out some key considerations to support the positive mental health and wellbeing of all children and young people. We would also like to draw your attention to a recent press release from the British Psychological Society’s Division of Educational and Child Psychology which concludes:

We’re urging the government to reconsider its emphasis on the idea that children and young people need to ‘catch up’ on their education and saying that supporting the wellbeing and educational needs of all children should be a priority.¹

Trauma informed, trauma responsive and trauma recovery approaches

Whilst we are pleased to hear about the additional funding being made available to state primary and secondary schools, we believe that it is essential that every effort is made to use it to ensure that all children in schools, early years and college settings can access education. We recognise that children who have experienced trauma will likely find their worry or anxiety exacerbated through the additional pressures of the pandemic and will need additional support to settle to learn. Your statement describes the kinds of goals and cultures in schools that can often escalate feelings of

¹ <https://beta.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/unhelpful-narrative-lost-learning-during-pandemic>

powerlessness and fear. The behaviours that often follow automatic fear reactions would not change with conversations, discipline, a culture of good behaviour or punishment. In fact, often, a culture where it is easy to 'make the wrong choice' can cause behaviour to escalate.

“Disciplined, safe and orderly environments”

In your speech, you commented that *“traditional teacher-led lessons with children seated facing the expert at the front of the class are powerful tools for enabling a structured learning environment where everyone flourishes”*. You also commented that *“students must learn that the expectation is they will follow reasonable adult instructions the first time - without dispute”*. These expectations do not show an understanding of the substantial percentage of children who are struggling with their daily life due to experiences of trauma.

Statistics suggest that in each class there are many children who are living with abuse, living in foster care, living in poverty, living with a mentally or physically ill parent, and many who have additional learning needs that makes adult instructions incredibly challenging. Therefore, we know that the focus must be on building trusting relationships that nurture children and help them to feel safe. Children must have opportunities to learn collaboratively and navigate their social world, as well as learning from the 'expert' at the front of the classroom.

Psychological research tells us that high levels of support alongside high expectations from adults will allow for a culture in which children can thrive. The phrase 'connection before correction' is used to explain how important it is to ensure that before any correction or 'challenge' the child needs to feel emotionally connected, known, and valued by the adult. Without this relationship, the child may feel further disconnection and isolation which can lead to increased negative behaviour.

The view of behaviour management outlined in your speech does not recognise the neurobiological automatic reactions to prolonged stress. Research has suggested that when a child experiences fear, their abilities to access language, thinking, negotiation and reflection are significantly impaired. Research has also shown that a child can access those areas of the brain when they feel safe and known by the adults who show consistent care, compassion and understanding.

We recognise that when the children *“get it wrong”*, as you describe, they need adults to help them feel safe again, and thus if teachers were to *“constantly teach and challenge them to do better”*, their feelings of failure, rejection and shame would escalate, which in turn may lead to more negative behaviours. This model of behaviour management does not work for many children and is unlikely to help children to self-regulate in these challenging times.

What do children need in the coming months?

1. Children need to be afforded the **opportunity to play**, enjoy the summer holiday, and 'catch up' with friends and family. Play is vital for learning, connection, and emotional development.
2. Whilst not all children are traumatised, all will need an opportunity to recover to some degree. We have an opportunity now to **prioritise wellbeing and mental health for all**. Talking to children about 'catching up' is unlikely to be helpful as it suggests that they have not been

learning over the past few months. We can therefore find ways to focus on making learning motivating, meaningful and fully inclusive.

3. We know that some children will have enjoyed learning at home, while many children will have had traumatic and sad experiences. Many children will be excited to come back to school and see their friends, others will be terrified. It is vital that teachers and school staff have **time and resources to welcome children back**, to connect and to (re)build relationships. This reconnection will be essential in building positive mental health and emotional wellbeing.
4. It is essential to **prioritise the wellbeing of teachers and educational staff** who have worked (and continue to work) relentlessly to ensure that all children have had opportunities to learn over the past 12 months.
5. We must **prioritise the social and emotional needs of children** by focusing on enabling schools to build a culture that recognises that the foundation to learning is one of emotional safety, where relationships are offered to the children which model compassion, empathy and nurture. Children have told researchers that they need safety, relationships, certainty, and opportunity; it is our duty as educators to provide these.

A school culture that is built on discipline and punishment will likely cause a rise in exclusions and chaos within our school systems. It is imperative that we understand the effects of this pandemic through a trauma recovery lens and aim for those who have experienced trauma to be given the opportunity to recover from that, which in turn leads to an appetite for learning and helping others.

It is our shared opinion that your focus upon a reward-punishment approach to raising behaviour standards, without duly prioritising the emotional stability upon which they depend, is a house built on sand. It represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the emotional, social, neurological, and therefore behavioural development of children. We urge you to reconsider and we would be overjoyed to meet with you and support you in developing a more psychologically informed approach to achieving your ambitions in this area.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch to discuss any aspect of this letter.

Yours faithfully,

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