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How a neuroscientific approach transformed our school (sponsored)

One head explains that an approach based on neuroscience has improved behaviour, cut exclusions and boosted wellbeing

By Russell Parton 20 March 2019 - 15:42



When Tim Cook became headteacher of Liskeard Hillfort Primary in November 2015, he knew he had a tough job on his hands. The school, located in Cornwall with high levels of deprivation, had just come out of special measures. Pupils were frequently getting in trouble, with 36 exclusions in a single year.

"It wasn't a path we could keep treading, and it wasn't morally what I believed in," he explains. Now the school is far more popular – applications increased by 11 per cent in two years – and it has a "good" rating for personal development, behaviour and welfare, attendance is above the national average and exclusions are down (so far this year there has only been one).

Cook attributes the turnaround in large part to the Thrive Approach®, a way of supporting social and emotional development based on neuroscience, attachment theory and child development. According to the schools that have adopted it, the method can improve

behaviour, reduce exclusions, raise academic attainment and boost wellbeing among staff and students.

Thrive draws on evidence from neuroscientific research, which asserts that the brain's ability to relate, love, learn and manage stress is largely dependent on neurological pathways formed in the first three years of life. It purports that our early relationships and experiences with parents or primary carers can significantly impact on our social and emotional development.

Research has shown that negative experiences during early years development, such as abuse or neglect, can severely affect the way we manage stress. This may result in the child feeling insecure, finding exploration frightening, being emotionally withdrawn or developing issues around expressing anger. These developmental "gaps" can then manifest through behavioural issues, lack of social skills and inability to access learning.

Improving staff and student wellbeing

But research has also revealed the brain's "neuroplasticity"; its capacity to modify itself in response to new experiences and forge new neural connections throughout life. This means it is possible to intervene at a later stage to identify and plug these gaps in emotional development, helping these vulnerable children become more resilient. This is the key to the Thrive Approach®.

"Thrive offered us a range of strategies to deal with children that might otherwise have been running around the school, swearing and being disruptive," Cook says.

Schools that have introduced the programme report improvements in behaviour, self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as – crucially – young people being better prepared to learn, because their needs around emotional wellbeing have been addressed. Some students who experience considerable challenges around interpersonal relationships, such as not being able to maintain eye contact, have found the method transformative in terms of relating to others.

The key to the method is addressing learned negative behaviours that have formed in early childhood, and replacing them with positive alternatives. This can bring better emotional regulation, which, in turn, can improve outlook and aspirations for the future. At a time of stretched budgets and timetables, it isn't necessarily easy to argue in favour of introducing additional programmes. But for those students who are already struggling (and are likely to be disrupting classes and causing issues for other students as well as themselves), the investment is clearly worth it.

Screening is a vital part of the process, Tim Cook continues. The Thrive-Online (TOL)TM programme enables staff to map and monitor children's development and create action plans, which suggest strategies and activities to use with children on a one-to-one basis or with larger groups.

"You have a layer of whole-class screening, then for your high-needs children, you do some individual screening and the software suggests specific strategies," he explains.

"For one child this might be some one-on-one time using a sand tray within our Thrive room; a refuge with beanbags, mirrors, cushions and puppets. For others, it might be creative play or a Thrive lunch club where children who we know get in trouble at lunchtime spend that time with an adult who they genuinely get on with."

Schools that are under pressure to improve maths and literacy results may not see how an approach that focuses on emotional and social development is going to boost outcomes, but prolonged exposure to Thrive has been found to boost academic results, as it puts children who have suffered adverse experiences in a position where they are ready to learn.



Thrive has also proved transformational in its approach towards behaviour, showing staff how to look beyond the idea of the "naughty child" to root causes and diagnosing the issues and prescribing strategies that, says Cook, really work.

"We have vulnerable children here at the highest level of child protection but through Thrive we have taught them over time to regulate their behaviour in the same way someone else would learn to use the apostrophe," Cook says.

The impact at Liskeard Hillfort has been "revelatory", he says, and the school's growing reputation and improved performance are evidence of that.

"It may sound a bit corny, but Thrive really has supported and developed a whole school ethos to valuing the child," Cook says. "Its underpinning ethos I wanted to align myself to, as it's fundamentally about human respect and human dignity.

"You still get teachers and lesser qualified staff who take an austere approach to behaviour. They think, 'Well if a child's being naughty, I'll shout at them and they'll stop it.' It probably will,

in fairness, but unless you understand the triggers behind those behaviours, all you're doing is sticking a sticking plaster."

Russell Parton is a freelance journalist

You can learn more about the [Thrive Approach here](#).



Russell Parton

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