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Frewen College (LS)

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Beyond Buzzwords – Creating Real Resilience

Education is full of buzzwords. Some baffling, some meaningful. But buzzwords don't translate into good practice in settings without strategy and innovation.

In the post-pandemic educational landscape talk of resilience was everywhere, and naturally so. The need for our pupils to be able to recover from adversity and bounce back from difficult life events was critical. Yet this challenge wasn't new for staff teaching in specialist settings, where a key question facing us for many years has been: How do we support pupils whose experience of education has been difficult, negative, exhausting or anxiety-provoking to engage in education, and rebuild their resilience?

Frewen College is a Residential Special School meeting the needs of pupils aged 7 to 19 with Specific Learning Difficulties, primarily Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Developmental Co-ordination Disorder. Many of our pupils also have co-occurring conditions including ADHD, Autism and SEMH needs (Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs).

“We look at positives first, utilise adaptive tools and make reasonable adjustments.”

Many of our learners join us disaffected, having had negative learning experiences or having “failed” in previous settings that were unable to meet their complex Special Educational Needs. These difficulties have often created barriers to engagement, and had a detrimental impact on wellbeing and self-esteem. Consequently, developing pupil resilience is an essential focus of

our wellbeing strategy. And, like many schools, we have been strategically reflecting on the changing educational landscape in the context of Covid, social media and societal pressures on learning and development.

The national trends are clear. Figures highlighted by the charity Mind reported that 1 in 6 young people in England (aged 5 to 16) experienced a mental health problem in 2020 (NHS Digital, 2020), with nearly one-third of 16 to 24 year-olds in the UK reporting some evidence of depression or anxiety in their most recent survey (ONS, 2020).

For us the solution was to develop our existing resources to sit within a restorative pathway that reflects the realities of our pupils' lived experience. One that directly teaches the communication and conflict resolution skills needed for self-representation and emotional resilience.

We cannot be successful working in isolation. We looked at positive practice in other schools through our ISA network and combined national research and evidence-based practice within our planning. We reflected that effective interventions need to take into consideration the developmental stage of pupils – not just their chronological age. Consequently, our restorative pathway is not a one-size-fits-all policy, but looks holistically at pupil need.

It starts with our curriculum. The foundation of our approach is a robust, adaptive and accessible curriculum that builds confidence, enables accelerated progress and is centred around engagement. We ensure that all of our pupils receive the same social and academic opportunities as their peers within mainstream settings, whilst accessing specialist intervention. We provide learning opportunities that ensure progress and potential are never limited. Learning should match the style and pace of each individual

learner. A key factor in our success is that all pupils are taught in small groups of no more than eight, allowing us the flexibility and freedom to individualise support.

We weave in specialist support. Pupils at Frewen College have access to in-house occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and wellbeing support as part of our core educational offer. Our small cohort size means all staff, from classroom teachers to the administrative and catering team, have an understanding of the unique needs and strengths of every pupil. Frewen is unique in that all classroom staff receive Level 3 training in dyslexia within their first year as a minimum requirement, and many of our staff hold additional higher qualifications. As a result, we can respond to individual needs rapidly and effectively and build a school community where pupils feel seen, understood and respected.

As the saying goes, culture eats strategy for breakfast. That's why we focus on ensuring that our school sets and maintains a culture where no one is afraid to ask for support. We know our pupils and their needs. We meet and greet at the door. We value reciprocal respect and set high expectations. We look at positives first, utilise adaptive tools and make reasonable adjustments.

Resilience comes from being given the chance to work through difficult problems.

We introduced a system of targeted friendship skills interventions which are designed to boost pupils' self-esteem whilst developing the skills required for successful friendships. Our Establishing Friendships programme provides the opportunity to practise and develop the initial skills of listening, looking, waiting, turn-taking and use of memory. Our Maintaining Friendships programme grants opportunities to problem-solve commonly occurring friendship issues, develop an understanding of the impact of stress on friendships and to develop emotional regulation strategies.

We directly teach the skills needed to negotiate social interaction and the emotional needs of others as we are conscious that for our pupils the social and societal pressures inherent in social media and adolescence have a lasting impact on wellbeing and attainment.

The restorative approach to learning and development, championed by the education reformer Paul Dix, is designed to encourage both staff and pupils to pursue respect for self, respect

for others and respect for the environment. At Frewen College the shared core values of 'Respect, Equality and Determination' sit at the heart of the school's ethos. Every person in the school community has a voice.

“How do we support pupils whose experience of education has been difficult, negative, exhausting or anxiety-provoking to engage in education, and rebuild their resilience?”

At Frewen rewards are tangible. For every positive values-based behaviour that we see a pupil demonstrate, they get two rewards.

- **The first is a digital point.** These points are collected and can be exchanged for a variety of prizes including tangible objects and experiences like skipping the lunch queue and wearing non-uniform.
- **The second is a physical gold token.** Tokens are used to vote for a prize which will be received at the end of the term or school year by the entire community. Currently pupils are voting between three end-of-term activities chosen by the student council. Sadly, my personal hope for an end-of-term Mr. Whippy is currently being trounced by the appeal of the cinema.

The point of this system is that it reinforces that success for one member of the community benefits the entire community. Pupils are motivated to recognise the achievements and successes of others.

In a system that recognises that developmental stage and chronological age are not always synchronous, it becomes essential to make reasonable adjustments and look individually at pupil need. This system challenges the age-old concern that pupils will feel it is unfair if different expectations are set for different



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pupils. Our system incentivises pupils to support their peers at whatever stage they are, and champion their progress.

So, what happens when it goes wrong? A restorative system is not a permissive system. Where issues arise that require intervention, teachers undertake scaffolded conversations, underpinned by a set of key questions, that allow pupils to explore the issue, consider differing perspectives and develop strategies to avoid further conflict.

The focus of these conversations is to build resilience and understanding by exploring consequence and impact and by supportively identifying and practising solutions. We have used Paul Dix's mantra "restore, redraw, repair" as the foundation for the design of our restorative practice resources. Visual scaffolds are utilised as part of this process to ensure pupils have a tangible record of their learning which can be referred to in the future, improving recall and generalisation.

Staff plan conversations carefully ensuring that they reserve enough time for them, rushed conversations don't lead to meaningful learning. Putting the pupil at the heart of the conversation puts them at the heart of the learning. You cannot develop a culture of mutual trust and respect without valuing pupil voice and recognising where the adult, too, can improve or develop their practice.

Improved resilience is a natural consequence of a holistic system that is purposefully designed to repair relationships; support the skills to understand and respect the views of others; and help pupils move beyond their initial personal responses. Restorative systems empower pupils to speak out and report issues as they know their voice will be heard and that issues will be dealt with fairly. By building conflict resolution skills, we empower our pupils to resolve conflict for themselves, leading to healthier relationships and improved resilience.

As Winston Churchill said "success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts". Our success lies in moving beyond the stereotypes of diagnosis and supporting each child as an individual, with a unique learning profile, and offering an approach that directly teaches the skills and strategies needed to overcome challenges.



Katie has taught in a range of specialist schools, including provisions for pupils with PSCN (Profound, Severe or Complex Needs) and C&I (Communication & Interaction) needs. Prior to joining Frewen College she was a Specialist Teacher for SEMH Needs in the Kent district of Swale, supporting settings to meet the needs of learners with SEND by providing advice and support, delivering training and leading provision development projects. Katie is a Sleep Scotland sleep counsellor and has been involved in creating a range of free support resources and interventions with particular relation to friendship skills, executive function, diagnosis support and Tourette's.

The 8 key restorative questions at Frewen College

1. What happened?
2. What were you thinking at the time?
3. What have you thought since?
4. How did this make people feel?
5. Who has been affected?
6. How have they been affected?
7. What should we do to put things right?
8. How can we do things differently in the future?

Effective restorative conversations for us utilise 2-5 of these questions to explore barriers to resilience and improve outcomes.

Bibliography:

NHS Digital. "Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey". October 2020. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>

Office for National Statistics (ONS). Young people's well-being in the UK: 2020. October 2020. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/youngpeopleswellbeingintheuk/2020>

To read more about Frewen College's approach, Members and their staff can read a case study from the school on our website. This followed their 2021 ISA Award for Outstanding Provision of Learning Support. This, and all other case studies are available here: <https://www.isaschools.org.uk/about/news-and-resources/isa-case-studies-and-guidance.html>