

Sean Pavitt describes how he used the human givens approach to transform a failing school for emotionally vulnerable and physically challenging youngsters.

Catching up – and going beyond

ONE afternoon, at the school where I am head teacher, the Key Stage 3 cricket team, made up of lads aged 12–14, were eagerly waiting, in their cricket whites, to go to the local cricket club to play a match. Then a call came through to say that the match had had to be cancelled. Disappointed, the boys changed out of their whites, quietly returned to their classes and settled back into lessons.



Nothing noteworthy about that, it might seem. But, in fact, it was a highly noteworthy event indeed. For our pupils all have a primary ‘diagnosis’ of behavioural, social and emotional difficulties (BSED) and were mostly excluded from mainstream schools because teachers couldn’t cope with their needs. They include young people with autism, speech and language difficulties, Tourette’s, so-called oppositional defiance disorder, attachment disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, along with others who have suffered severe emotional and often physical trauma. These are children who had never been able to play sports with outside clubs because their behaviour was too unpredictable to risk taking them out of the school grounds. The heightened emotions surrounding winning and losing present especially huge difficulties for them. Yet, here they were, desperately disappointed but not kicking off. All the staff felt enormous pride that day.

How different from when I first took over at Longspee School in Poole, Dorset; I had never experienced such high levels of daily disruption. It was routine for students to argue fiercely with staff and each other, get into fights, destroy property, escape on to the roof, and run away. On my very first day, I was summoned by a teacher because a boy had just lobbed a chair through a closed window, climbed through the broken glass and vanished out of the grounds, followed by the rest of his class (six equally emotionally aroused 13–14-year-olds). The kids were unquestionably in control at Longspee. Some refused to sit down ever in the classroom and the learning achieved was minimal, despite the presence of dedicated and skilled teachers. The highly demoralised staff spent a lot of their time attempting to restrain pupils, using the sanctioned ‘holding’ techniques to prevent them further harming themselves or others. The pupils were rarely able to engage in contact sports, even within the school grounds, because of the risks – and not least because the field on which they might have

played was separated from a dual carriageway by just a hedge. Anti-climb paint was everywhere, although it offered little by way of deterrent.

I knew, however, exactly what I was letting myself in for. (As had been expected, the Ofsted school inspection team put Longspee into ‘special measures’ as a failing school just five weeks after my arrival.) It was a challenge I welcomed for a number of reasons. First, I could relate to the children’s experience. When I was 12, I was hit by a speeding car while out cycling with a friend. According to the paramedic who, to my good fortune, was picnicking nearby with his wife and came promptly to my assistance, I was thrown 12 feet into the air with the force of the collision. I was in a coma for a week and came round to find myself paralysed down the left side, unable to eat and talk properly, or dress and go to the toilet unaided.

Gradually, through occupational therapy, physiotherapy and sport, which I loved, I re-covered my physical abilities but no one ever addressed the emotional impact of my brain injury. I was like a toddler, throwing tantrums. (Even now, I struggle to deal with extremes of emotion.) At school, I was left to go at my own pace but it seemed as if the words I was hearing were not making sense and I was in some strange sort of world of my own. I managed within a year to start achieving reasonably again but I now had a very short fuse and constantly got into fights. Some of these were as a result of the teasing I received because I was learning ballet to help my coordination.

I didn’t do particularly well at GCSEs and went to college at 16, where I continued to get into fights and not to study. Even when I won a place at the prestigious Carnegie Faculty of Sports and Education (as it is now called) at Leeds Metropolitan University, to train to be a PE teacher, I was still fighting and getting myself into dangerous situations. At the end of the first year, I realised that I would end up dead or in prison if I continued down that path. One day, while waiting for a friend, I saw some books outside a charity shop and one on Buddhism caught my eye. I’m not a Buddhist but it resonated with me and I bought it. It was that book that made me realise that I had to be the one to take control and to make choices, instead of blaming others for misfortunes and getting angry. It was a turning point.

Special needs

Meanwhile, I had been carrying out teaching practice in mainstream schools and hated it – although I didn't realise it then, I was pattern matching to my own troubled experience at school. But, after a summer job as a care worker in a residential school for children with autism and extreme challenging behaviour, which I loved, I begged to be given a placement in a special school. I knew at once I had found my *métier*. Despite my own 'short fuse', I had never felt personally confronted by challenging behaviour in such a setting and, as my aunt had Down's syndrome and my brother suffered visual impairment, I had always been comfortable about special needs.

After graduating, I was lucky to get my first teaching job at Hillingdon Manor, the school for young people with autism and Asperger's syndrome then run by Angela Austin, who had enthusiastically and highly successfully incorporated the human givens approach into her methods. Eight years later, after her retirement, I was principal. The human givens approach had enabled me, for the first time, to make sense of all that had happened to me, emotionally, during my own education and I was keen to try out the method, which placed such strong emphasis on emotional health, in a different but equally challenging setting. So it came about that I accepted the post of head teacher at the troubled Longspee School, taking with me a great many of Angela's successful techniques and ready to add some of my own.

The challenge at Longspee

Longspee is attended by around 40 students (almost all male) diagnosed with BSED, aged from five (Key Stage 1) up to 14 (Key Stage 3). Our Key Stage 1 is a satellite unit attached to a primary school. At Longspee itself, there are five classes, with a maximum of seven children in each, for those at Key Stage 2 and 3. We have 12 teachers, 14 teaching assistants, a behaviour support team and administrative staff. We also offer an outreach service, managed by an assistant head teacher and two teachers, who support 40 schools in Poole with their pupils with challenging behaviour.

When I arrived, Longspee was a miserable place. When a school is put into special measures, it passes out of Ofsted's remit into that of Her Majesty's Inspectorate, with termly probing visits from the inspectors and a requirement for positive change to happen quickly, to save the school from closure. This meant that all problem fronts had to be tackled at once, more quickly than is ideal and without the desired time for reflection. It was, therefore, going to be a very good test of the human givens model. Not surprisingly, at the time I arrived, the staff were extremely demoralised. They were routinely subjected to

verbal and physical abuse from their pupils and they were shocked and hurt by the damning Ofsted report which put us into special measures, however much they were expecting it. I had a frank meeting with them all, setting out my ideas. Before I took up my post, I had held three training days with staff, which included time to explain the crucial importance of meeting emotional needs – their own as well as those of the children – for creating a healthy, thriving school, but, at that point, they had lost heart and were not impressed. Now, however, when I asked them to agree to try something different along these lines, as what had been done to date clearly hadn't worked, they all willingly came on board.

Open door for parents

Among the changes put in place immediately was an open-door policy for parents. It was vital to get them on board as well, as very many of them didn't want their children to remain at the school and feared for their safety. I spent many hours with families, addressing their concerns. Now, some of our former most strident critics are our staunchest allies.

The first new strategy for promoting good behaviour, which parents received a letter about, was the introduction of a programme of 'catch up' periods after school for pupils who engaged in behaviours such as leaving the premises without permission, damaging property, repeatedly disrupting teaching and learning, or any other behaviour prejudicial to the good order of the school. We present 'catch up' literally as time needed to catch up on learning which has been missed as a result of the aberrant behaviour, rather than as the more traditional 'detention'. In this way, children can see it as a direct consequence of their behaviour, rather than as a punishment. (This is something that needs continual reinforcement. Just recently, I asked a lad who was booked for 'catch up' that evening why he had to attend it. "Dunno," he said. "Did you swear?" I asked him. "Yes." "Well, you *do* know why you are going to 'catch up', then.")

Calling the police

We made it clear from the outset that bad behaviour would not be tolerated and that we would call in the police if pupils were physically violent or caused criminal damage. This was something of a deterrent, as very many of our pupils already had police 'reprimands' and knew that an additional transgression might land them in court. It was essential that we were able to present our pupils with a model by which they could learn success in society and not be protected from consequences that the law imposes. Where necessary, we also excluded more pupils for fixed periods, to get the message across that we expected our pupils to come to school to *learn* and not to cause disruptions. Initially, our exclusion figures and use of physical restraint rocketed but quickly fell, as the new regime started to have a positive impact. Pupils were learning that we had

expectations of them, that we hadn't written them off (at that time, what they were most successful at was failing) and that we thought them worthy and capable of achievement.

The introduction of a behaviour support team also helped us establish a new order. Staff have radio equipment in their classrooms so that they can call for assistance, when needed. The behaviour support team are then able to take disruptive pupils out of a classroom and dedicate time to calming them down instead of, as previously, obliging a teaching assistant to leave the class with the pupil, leaving the teacher to try to cope with the remaining members of a now highly anxious or otherwise emotionally aroused class. The behaviour support team does whatever is required to get a troublesome pupil back into a mental state where they can learn again. They might set the pupil jobs around the school, arrange for them to listen and apologise to someone they have hurt or instigate conversations with parents.

No blame

Enormously important has been the establishment of a no-blame culture, which Angela Austin instituted with such success at Hillingdon Manor School. Quite simply, we discourage making anyone feel in the wrong, as that leads to an escalation of emotional arousal. Instead, we keep emphasising, when students are calmed down after an emotional outburst, the role of personal choice and the consequences, positive and negative, of chosen behaviours. We work hard to break the cycle of emotional all-or-nothing thinking ("I'm out of class without permission, so I might as well break some windows now, as well"), stressing that level of consequences is contingent on levels of misbehaviour, so there is always a way out at some point, which can reduce the consequences and lead them back to the path of success. Our pupils are increasingly able to access their observing selves quickly enough to recognise this, even when they are already emotionally aroused.

Another strand of remedial action was the establishment of regular links with 'special support teams' – representatives from agencies concerned with adolescent mental health, educational welfare, social care and antisocial behaviours, who can offer extra support to those that need it. Longspee is located at the bottom of a cul-de-sac but it had become a dead end in other ways, too, and links with such important other agencies had become non-existent.

Central to everything we do is emotional health. We even have an emotional health policy, which sets out how, for instance, we aim to increase our children's sense of significance and status (through respect, consideration and oppor-

tunities for success); security (through providing clear, consistent guidelines and boundaries); connection to the community (through creation of a sense of identity, trust and acceptance); resilience (through empowering them with strategies to deal with emotional problems); problem-solving skills (through stimulating curiosity, motivation and creativity); empathy (through co-operative activities); and sense of fun (through a learning process which is enjoyable and fosters trust and friendship).

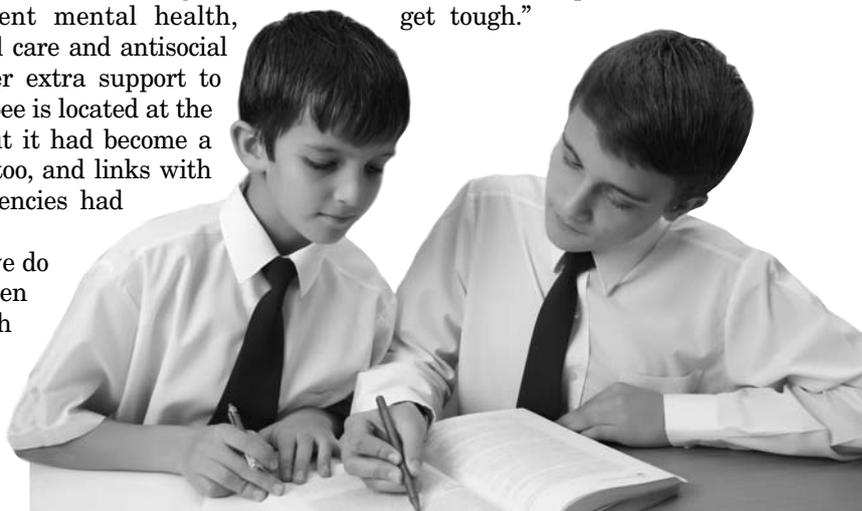
It is for the purpose of fostering emotional health as much as physical health that we have introduced a breakfast club, which starts at 9am every morning and which all children attend. Not only does this ensure that all our pupils start their school day with food inside them but it gives the behaviour support team, who serve the breakfasts, a chance to see who might be looking vulnerable that morning and, therefore, might need a little extra attention. Breakfast club also provides an opportunity to socialise together and, at the end of it, twice a week, there is a short assembly during which awards are given out to those who have won them, and everyone celebrates success.

On the walls of the dining hall, where breakfast club and lunch take place, are pictures of members of the school council, whose members have input into various aspects of school life, such as helping come up with ideas for awards and how award money can be spent. (We like to keep changing what we offer, so as to keep the awards idea fresh.) The school council members take pride in their roles – it is novel for them to have their opinions considered seriously. Recently they have suggested that existing pupils should produce a laminated handbook for new pupils, explaining our rules and consequences. They have also suggested that drinking water should be available at all times in all classrooms.

Sanctuary

Alongside the school council's pictures in the dining hall are those of the peer support team, who advertise themselves as follows: "We know how it feels when we go through a rough patch.

We are here to help our friends when times get tough."



Sean Pavitt is a head teacher with over 15 years' experience in the field of special educational needs. He has run schools for children with both autism and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and has a strong therapeutic background, using many of the human givens principles in his work. As well as running a successful school for children with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties, he is also currently employed as a consultant head teacher for the borough of Poole to remodel its educational strategy for some of its most vulnerable pupils. He is also a director of a specialist education consultancy company: Spectrum Support & Consultancy.

Photo: © Vanel | Dreamstime.com

Sometimes, when times get tough, a child may be taken to spend some time in 'the sanctuary', a recessed area with comfortable beanbags to sink into. The pupils decorated the sanctuary themselves, putting coloured film over the window at the back, making a white picket fence at the front and adding painted cardboard leaves and branches within, to create a peaceful rainforest retreat. No one has ever destroyed it.

At the same time as all these developments were being put in place, we were also revamping the curriculum, so that we could better engage our learners. We have re-thought timetables, length of lessons, use of our space and focus wherever possible on cross-curricular links – for instance, linking literacy and science into our current theme of rainforests – and encourage children to take responsibility for, and pride in, their learning. Every lesson plan incorporates a 'must', a 'should' and a 'could', which is written up on the whiteboard. A 'must' denotes the main teaching point of the lesson (for instance, recasting a paragraph written from the first person perspective into the third person) and earns one point. Failure to complete a 'must' results in a catch-up session. A 'should' denotes the doing of something that entails a bit of extra effort (for instance, correct use of capital letters in the paragraph) and earns two points. A 'could' is an optional extra (for instance, writing one's own short paragraph in the third person and then converting it into the first person). This earns three points.

Ruby, silver and gold

All points go towards the earning of awards – £5 for ruby, £10 for silver and £15 for gold (see box) and 'distinction' awards, which enable pupils to achieve prizes for success or participate in a Friday afternoon reward event, such as bowling. These are given out at assemblies, along with various 'special quality' awards. One special quality award goes to the pupil who has dealt best with unexpected change that week – always a struggle for children on a short emotional fuse. (The entire Key Stage 3 cricket team received this award on the day that they behaved so well when their match was cancelled.)

At Key Stage 3, our students follow a 'parallel pathway' to ready those that can to return to mainstream education. This requires outstanding teaching from our educational staff, which would not have been possible to achieve without our central focus on emotional health: a teacher can be the best in the world but, if they spend their day fearing physical violence or verbal abuse, they won't be able to deliver. Prior to the introduction of the human givens approach, staff absence levels were massive and largely attributable to stress. Now, the fact that so many of our pupils return to mainstream

Ruby award



You will be able to earn your Ruby Award and £5 by earning stickers in the following ways:

- ✓ Achieving **330** points will earn you one **motorbike** sticker.
- ✓ Getting a **Courtesy/Empathy Award** from your class will earn you one **swimmer** sticker.
- ✓ Earning an **Achievement Award** from your class will get you one **snooker player** sticker.
- ✓ If you get **3 Head Teacher Awards**, you will earn yourself one **guitar** sticker.
- ✓ When you have earned **18 tokens**, you will receive one **skateboard** sticker.
- ✓ If the **School council** presents you with an award, you will earn a **footballer** sticker.
- ✓ In order to complete your Ruby Award, **you must earn at least one motorbike sticker (330 points) and also at least one swimmer sticker** (Courtesy/Empathy Class Award).
- ✓ You need to collect a total of **6 stickers** and you can have any combination as long as at least one is a motorbike and at least one is a swimmer.
- ✓ When you have earned your Ruby Award you will be able to take it home and also receive £5. You will then work on getting your Silver Award and £10 by earning 12 stickers and then your Gold Award and £15 by earning 18 stickers.

Good luck!

education says it all.

Our most challenging children, however, tend to choose to follow a more vocational pathway, where their first task is to learn to value themselves, let go of defensiveness and find out what interests and stretches them. This requires excellent teaching with innovative delivery and engagement. Far from not letting them outside of the school premises for fear of the consequences, we engage them in all sorts of external activities now. For instance, the Purbeck Arts Festival project involved them in making videos. In a project run in collaboration with the National Trust, they helped build walkways. Next year, at the local Monkey World, they will get involved with veterinary care. Our school won the regional heat of the "Kids Get Cooking" competition and came 11th out of 11,000 schools in the national competition – a stunning achievement for which Jamie Oliver presented the prizes. (The pupils collected cockles, cleaned them, came up with a recipe for cockles and pasta and cooked the dish. They

followed this with Dorset apple cake, for which they milled their own flour at a mill and sourced the rest of the ingredients from a farm shop.) All our pupils go out on visits and particularly enjoy voluntary work.

Teaching the meeting of needs

Our curriculum is designed not only to get emotional needs met but to build in our pupils the capacity for them to meet their needs positively for themselves. So we consider it important that, alongside encouraging achievement, competence, connection, status, etc, we give our children the confidence to risk failure by stretching themselves and 'having a go' – something which used to be anathema to these young people, with their low sense of self-esteem and bruised egos. We do this through continual acknowledgement of their efforts and by whetting their curiosity to try new things.

Two years on, Longspee may still be at the end of a cul-de-sac but there is no longer any sense, among pupils, parents or staff, that there is anything dead-end about us. Our attendance has gone up by more than 15 per cent to 90 per cent and parents tell us that their children actually want to come to school now. Importantly, the pupils also say they feel safe, which they didn't before.

As part of our drive for personal development and wellbeing, we identified early on, through observation and incident sheets kept for each child, a total of 76 undesired behaviours (such as refusal to get out of transport, refusal to enter class, requiring time to settle down, spitting, physical abuse, responding poorly to losing competitions, etc), which were variously exhibited. From spring 2008, teachers were asked to go through this list of behaviours every half term and keep track of each child, noting which behaviours had improved and which had worsened. Scores, based on level of risk, have plummeted on average from 90 to 30. Thus we have been able quite clearly to track a changing culture from one of bad behaviour to one of learning. The results have been so impressive that the behaviour target we set in July 2008 to meet by July 2009 had already been met by the previous autumn.

Our academic progress has also been exciting, with progress in English and maths throughout the school not only outstanding but higher than the average made in a mainstream school. When one boy of 11 achieved a Level 4 (the expected average) in the National Tests this year, his mother was almost in tears. He had been out of school for a long, long time and had only started with us in September last year. The emphasis on meeting emotional needs in a constructive way has had a huge impact on staff, freeing them up to teach instead of spending their time struggling in vain to contain violence, with impressive results to show for it.

Longspee today

We now have many more children able to return

to mainstream education – this year alone, six out of 35 returned. All have managed to maintain their places and haven't needed additional support, beyond the single term of outreach support that all our returning pupils receive. (Some of the pupils had been at Longspee for many years and were reluctant to leave. We support them to see return as an opportunity for a positive life change.) While my aim is to enable children to achieve academically within the least restrictive setting, for some, undoubtedly, that setting is Longspee. Unfortunately, we can cater for our pupils only until they are 14 and, after that, provision is patchy. On the strength of Longspee's successes, I have recently been appointed by the local authority as a consultant head teacher to work one day a week developing BSED provision across Poole for those reaching Key Stage 4 (the GCSE years).

Longspee today is a very different place from the school I joined. We have a happy staff and much happier students. We have a specialist science laboratory, where children do experiments involving Bunsen burners and chemicals (inconceivable before). Pupils are allowed out to play sports in the field that backs onto the dual carriageway. Through volunteering opportunities, pupils have really taken to helping and doing things for others, aware, for the first time, that many people have more challenges to cope with than they themselves do. (Previously, from a highly self-critical perspective, they had written themselves off as at the bottom of the heap.) Kindness has even become a bit contagious. When a group of boys were in the changing rooms at the local swimming pool, preparing to go swimming, one elected to stay to help an elderly disabled man find the glasses that he had mislaid there.

Perhaps the November report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate says it all: "During the last year, pupils have begun to put behind them a record of underachievement and are learning how to learn, gaining the satisfaction that success brings. ... [Longspee's] greatest strength lies in the pupils' good personal development, because of emotional health being high amongst the school's priorities."

It is good to have the central importance of emotional health acknowledged in this way. We hear of people diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, or with conditions such as dyslexia, who still go on to achieve spectacularly. But no one is ever truly effective, let alone outstanding, if they are in poor emotional health. Until emotional needs are met and emotional health is in place, children can't make the progress that they are entitled to. Of course, some of our pupils still go home after school to less than positive circumstances but, at least, while they are with us, they are being nurtured and will have a degree of choice about how to live their own lives. So I like to remind them of these words, which are prominently posted below our school sign: "Enter with a past; leave with a future". ■