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Research-based interventions to support SEMH learners at Leeds City College

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

To pilot and evaluate a psychology-informed intervention using the Equilibration Process to support 14–16-year-old learners with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. The goal was to foster resilience, reframe negative thought patterns, and improve engagement, attendance, and emotional regulation in order to help protect students from radicalisation and grooming.

Introduction

Leeds City College is a large Further Education (FE) provider with over 20,000 students across mainstream, specialist, and alternative provision. The college serves a diverse community, including learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), SEMH needs, and those at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). With 22% of learners identified as SEND—significantly above local and national averages—the need for innovative, inclusive interventions is critical.

This project emerged from a collaboration between the Deputy Head of SEND and a colleague from the 14–16 Skills Programme. The programme supports students of compulsory school age who have disengaged from mainstream education. The intervention aimed to help these learners reframe their emotional responses to challenging experiences and build a more resilient mindset.

Implementation

Students were considered suitable for this intervention if they were identified by multiple members of staff who knew the young person well, using the criteria below as a guide:

- Is SEMH their primary and presenting need at this time?
- Is the learner experiencing significant barriers to learning and unable to make good progress towards their next destination currently?
- Are they engaging in sessions with at least one member of the team and are accepting help?
- Do they have a positive and trusting relationship with the lead practitioner who is delivering the intervention?
- Do we have a multidisciplinary team who agree that this is the right support for that individual?

Implementation (continued)

The intervention was delivered in two formats:

Intensive 1:1 Coaching Sessions

Using a structured 9-question Equilibration Process, students explored their emotional responses to events or individuals. This model is time intensive and requires highly trained staff who are able to identify how to support students in a sensitive way and when to refer to other agencies and support teams when necessary.

Each student participated in five one-hour sessions as part of the intervention. For each session, staff allocated approximately two hours, which included preparation time and post-session documentation. The intervention was delivered over a five-week period, and the estimated cost per student was £320, accounting for staffing and resources.

Condensed Group Tutorial Sessions

A simplified version of the questionnaire was used in group settings, particularly around exam periods, to support emotional regulation and mindset.

The Equilibrium Process is a step-by-step questioning methodology that helps balance a person's perceptions of an event or person in their life. Therefore, prior to administering the methodology, a presenting problem has to be established. A person may have feelings such as loss, grief, frustration, anger, admiration or envy that occupy their mind to a detrimental level due to a person displaying certain behaviours or due to an event in their life perceived as either negative or positive. It's really important to note that these feelings can either be negative or positive as both extremes can have a detrimental effect on a person's behaviour. The steps of the process are outlined below: (more detail can be found in the Appendix)

1. Identify the Presenting Problem

Build rapport and use prompts to uncover emotional triggers—resentment, admiration, grief, etc.

2. Select Appropriate Questions

Choose from three versions of the questionnaire based on the student's readiness and the practitioner's experience.

3. Conduct Coaching Sessions

Ask questions directly, using prompts to explore the student's life domains (social, family, mental, vocational). Encourage certainty and depth in responses.

4. Review and Reflect

In follow-up sessions, assess shifts in perspective and emotional state. Use this opportunity to set realistic life goals.

Active Ingredients for Success

- Staff with backgrounds in child development, psychology, and coaching. Ideally staff delivering the intervention would have an educational background in child development or child psychology – specifically Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Staff should be expected to have a working knowledge of coaching cultures and how to implement a coaching conversation with students and have previous experience of working in this way with students.
- Minimum 6 hours of CPD before delivery. CPD time would need to be dedicated to this with a minimum expectation of 6 hours before starting to deliver the intervention.



Active Ingredients for Success (continued)

- Fidelity to the Equilibration Process. Equilibration process must be followed as instructed without deviation until the learner is ready to move forward with confidence in their answers to the prescribed questions.
- Multidisciplinary team input for student selection. Learners must be identified as suitable for the intervention using a multidisciplinary approach.
- Built-in reflection sessions. Reflections sessions must be built into the intervention schedule to allow learners to reflect on their changed perspectives.

Outcomes and Impact

The intended outcome of delivering this intervention was to help students with their emotional states - both negative and positive - which can influence their behaviour. With our students the sessions have specifically helped with meeting their EHCP outcomes by increasing attention and concentration on self and adult directed tasks by helping to regulate emotions so that anxieties and challenging behaviours are reduced. The sessions have led to reports of improved self-confidence in relation to college work and relationships. Staff have noted that these students have become more interactive with the world around them, feel more confident with high pressure situations and feel comfortable with themselves and others in different environments and situations. These students have been exposed to a different perspective to what they originally thought and given strategies for managing emotional distress triggered by skewed positive and negative interpretations of others and situations. These skills could be used to help self-regulation and prevent physical outbursts across a week in the school setting.

Key Impact:

- Improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety
- Increased attention and concentration on tasks
- Enhanced self-confidence and engagement with college work
- Greater comfort in high-pressure situations
- Reduced safeguarding risks
- Improved attendance and curriculum engagement
- Progress toward EHCP outcomes and successful post-16 transitions

Notable Feedback:

"This has proved to be a much more effective method of exploring issues with T, who is intellectually keen to engage in these debates but in a way which is non-confrontational and where he does not feel personally criticised. This may be especially important for a neurodivergent young male such as T who has experienced a number of difficulties in terms of finding himself/ fitting in amongst his peers and within the education system." – Safeguarding Lead

Key Learning

The Equilibration Process is highly effective when delivered with fidelity and by trained staff.

It supports both individual and group interventions.

Coaching conversations can be particularly powerful for neurodiverse learners.

Reflection and goal-setting are essential for consolidating impact.

The intervention can be adapted for wider use across departments and campuses.

Conclusion

This project demonstrates the power of psychology-informed coaching interventions in supporting SEMH learners. By helping students reframe their emotional responses and build resilience, Leeds City College has created a model that not only improves outcomes but also fosters deeper self-awareness and personal growth.

Appendix I

Equilibration Process step-by step process:

1. 1. Identifying the presenting problem/s
2. 2. Establish which questions to ask
3. 3. Ask the questions in a coaching session
4. 4. Review the results with the student

1. Identifying the presenting problem/s:

The most important starting point to establishing the presenting problem is building rapport with the student to enable them to express their feelings openly. Once rapport has been established and the student feels ready to share their feelings the following prompts can be used/asked to the student.

- Is there anyone that you can think of that has hurt you (emotionally) that still affects you today? (resentment)
- Is there anyone that you admire or envy strongly, either past or present? (admiration)
- Is there anyone that occupies your mind constantly throughout the day? Describe how you feel? (resentment or admiration)
- Is there any event in the past that has happened to you that you would rather forget or that brings about hard feelings? (resentment)
- Is there any event in the past that happened to you that you wish you could have again? (admiration)

Whether dealing with resentment or admiration it is really important that the behaviour displayed by the person, or an event is significant enough that it is deemed to affect the student's behaviour. It is likely the person, or event will occupy space and time in the student's mind on a regular basis.

Appendix I (continued)

2. Establish which questions to ask

From there you will need to establish if it's a strong resentment or strong admiration. From there the equilibration process can be administered. The original process consists of 9 questions (attached) which all require prompts to elicit answers from the student. However, throughout the duration of implementing this for the BIG Idea, we have used modifications which have meant condensing the questions down as an experimentation to simplify the consultation between the teacher and student. Whilst the full process will elicit the most desired results, the condensed versions were still very effective in helping students with various issues. Attached are three options of questions and prompts to be asked. When deciding which option to choose please consider two important factors: how experienced the teacher is at coaching; how ready the student is to talk in-depth about their issues.

3. Ask the questions in a coaching session

How you ask the questions and exactly following the sequence of the questions are probably the most important aspects of asking the questions. You must ask the questions directly and as they are written initially, but with as natural a tone as possible (not like you are reading from a script). From there you can use prompts and elaborate. For example, if the question is 'How is the behaviour a positive or gain to you?'... you might say 'what were the positives - what did you get out of this person displaying this behaviour?'. Because the student probably hasn't thought in this way before about the issue, it's important to think of their mindset as a box with lots of doors. Initially they are going to think narrowly about the situation, and you might get responses such as 'there are no benefits' or 'it made me feel annoyed (or another negative feeling)'. These responses do not answer the question and it's important to get them to answer it with certainty. You might even say 'I didn't ask if there are benefits, I asked what the benefits are, so let's look closer'. With these initial answers, the student's mindset is still within the box with no doors open. It's your job to open some of those doors for them by exploring the idea that this event or behaviour from someone else has two sides to it. One really effective way to open some doors is to use prompts relating to their life. Ask the question in terms of the different aspects of their life or something that you know is important to them. Areas to explore could be their social, physical, mental, family, career/vocation, financial, spiritual life. For example, you could ask, 'how did this behaviour benefit your social life? What friends did you get closer to... who was there for you?'

In order for this process to be effective, the student will need to have a feeling of certainty about their answers. They cannot be vague, and they must feel a shift in their understanding of the event or behaviour in relation to the question. For example, if the question is 'How is the behaviour a positive or gain to you?' you will want them to say what came out of the event or person being that way. What positive experience transpired in their life as a result of it.

The application of the methodology relates to classical conditioning by way of repetition until unconscious learning occurs. In this case when a person answers each question 20-30 times they will generate an automatic response whenever they encounter a specific stimulus. For example, if the student answers 'How is the behaviour a positive or gain to you?' repeatedly for 20-30 times they will indeed start to see and feel the benefits. If they only answer this question once or twice, they will not.

The final prompting question to allow the process to move on to the next question is to reinforce the question to see if they feel there has been a shift. For example, for the question 'go to a time in your life where you have displayed the same behaviour', at the end you might ask 'can you see that you display this behaviour to the same degree as them'. Or, for the question 'How is displaying this admired trait a negative or loss to you?' at the end you could ask 'do you feel this behaviour is equally negative as it is a positive to you?'. Only when the student says, 'yes I do' or 'yes I feel that', can you then move on to the next question.

Appendix I (continued)

4. Review the results with the student

The review stage will come in a separate session after the equilibration process. During this session you can reflect on how the student felt about the session. If the student talks with a different perspective and has a different less emotional attitude about the issue, then this is a sign that the equilibration has been effective. You could ask questions like 'if I was to give you a magic wand, would you change anything about the issue?' or 'how do you feel about the issue now'. If the equilibration session has been effective, the answer you are likely to get is a neutral one because they are unlikely to be feeling skewed towards either a positive or negative feeling. The student will hopefully feel clearer in their thoughts and inspired by the liberation of having a clearer conscience about the issue. If this is the case, it's a really good time to set some realistic life goals.