

# GREENHILL SPECIAL SCHOOL

How Greenhill Special School used Trauma Informed Practice to change a volatile environment and support their young people to thrive.

## WHY WAS CHANGE NEEDED?

Back in 2009, the school environment was volatile, highly charged, extremely challenging and one where physical intervention was often necessary to keep staff and pupils safe.

Since then, the leadership team and staff have worked hard at implementing change and this has been embraced by new Head-teacher, Shane Mock who joined the school in January 2020.

The school's vision is for all of their young people to thrive in a caring and supportive community, equipped with the skills that will help them to become the best they can in order to make a positive contribution to society.

## WHICH TRAININGS WERE USED?

TISUK Diploma for 20 staff, to be rolled out for all staff. Ongoing professional development

## HOW WERE CHANGES MADE?

Staff training and development has been key, and delivered in an ongoing way, including learning about ACE's, PACE, Dan Siegel's approach to understanding the brain, attachment theory and nurture.

There was a shift towards a relational way of working which included the development of a discrete nurture class and a bespoke Creative Outdoor Education Development (COED) programme.

In autumn 2019, Sarah Penny, the school's Family Psychotherapist, undertook the TISUK Diploma; she felt it offered a structure that would enable the school to wrap language around the practice and skills that the school was already developing as well as providing a professional forum for the staff to connect with and collaborate with other schools.

**“Here was the shared language, theoretical framework and range of practical approaches that we needed! I finally had a wider systemic sense of how this could be applied to a school system if we could embed it within whole school approach” recalls Sarah. ‘Due to the broad and comprehensive evidence base there was**

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## SCHOOL INFO:

Secondary  
(11-18yrs)

Cardiff City Council  
maintained

Cardiff, Wales

64 pupils  
(Currently all boys)

100% with SEN  
Statements many  
with specific learning  
difficulties such as  
dyslexia, dyspraxia or  
attention deficit hyper-  
activity disorder

7 classes broadly de-  
termined by age and  
Key Stage

Providing an alter-  
native education  
programme to meet  
pupils' needs



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**extremely supportive buy in from the Senior Leadership Team and Governors.”**

Soon after Sarah completed the TISUK diploma Covid-19 struck and there was a change of Headteacher, when Shane Mock arrived. Understandably, there was a great deal of anxiety and a tangible sense of unease from the staff. In discussion with the senior leadership team it was agreed that Sarah would offer a whole school consultation to staff with a focus on how the staff perceived the level of support being offered by the leadership team. Using the section from the TISUK whole school questionnaire staff were invited to anonymously share their thoughts and feelings and encouraged to include examples to support any points they wished to raise.

Staff seized the opportunity and did not hold back. This could have created a damaging rift between staff and leaders. However, the opposite was achieved. Sarah collated all of the feedback, shared it with the senior leaders and then staff and leadership came together to listen to the comments that had been raised and to allow leaders to respond. This was carried out with openness, respect, acknowledgement and followed by action.

People on both sides felt listened to and understood. This was an important catalyst for change and an example of how relationships at all levels were seen as the highest priority. An ongoing action remains the ‘I Wish My SLT Knew’ box that is always available and is responded to weekly by the Headteacher.

**‘Greenhill is a ‘Trauma Informed School’ and all interactions between staff and students are based on the values of respect and responsibility in order to foster good relationships. Greenhill is a great place to be.’ Shane Mock, Headteacher**

The whole school staff team was now committed to embracing TISUK and set about a bold and creative plan. In the following year 19 members of staff undertook the TISUK Diploma, joining different cohorts so that staff release could be manageable.

Points for good behaviour are no longer awarded. Positive feedback is not about conforming. It is about being noticed, valued and recognised. This applies to everyone in the setting, with pupils and staff receiving postcards celebrating and thanking them for something they have been noticed doing that has made a difference to others.

Staff model and talk with pupils about all aspects of PSHE, about how their brains work and the impact on their bodies. They support the development of a vocabulary for sensations and emotions, as well as building a range of strategies that students are increasingly able to use.

TISUK practice is woven throughout all approaches at Greenhill. Not only do staff Meet and Greet pupils, there are seven trained therapy school dogs who are also an important part of the warm greetings and have special relationships with individual pupils.

***‘This is the best training I have ever done. Now everyone was talking with understanding about mental health and there was a collective buzz, shared enthusiasm and growing confidence.’***

**Donna Jones,  
Assistant Head**

***‘We see, and also hear from parents, that pupils who go from 0 to 100 in nanoseconds are now able to self-regulate much more quickly, with the gap between incidents increasing and reducing in frequency with lower intensity. These are such important steps forward. Our school is calm.’***

**Sarah Penny, Family  
Theapist**

***‘At Greenhill we know that you can’t change the world, but you can change somebody’s world.’***

**Donna Jones,  
Assistant Head**

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Children agree with their emotionally available adults how they would like their 'meet and greet' to be and this positive start to the day is then followed by a shared breakfast. Throughout the day staff and pupils learn together, eat together and play together, especially making use of their outside area as much as possible.

*'Luna has grown up with the learners and they take responsibility for her welfare'*

*'She helps make the classroom feel like a safe and welcoming place for the boys.'*

*'Petting and interacting with Luna and seeing her on a daily basis helps the boys to regulate.'*

*'Luna somehow knows when the learners are dysregulated and will seek them out to be petted. This has a soothing effect on the boys.' Feedback from staff about Luna, one of the Therapy Dogs.*

## WHAT HAS THE IMPACT BEEN?

The school has become a community of reflective, inspired learners who could be found engaged in deep conversations about their questions, observations, case studies, practical application, successes, wonderings, worries etc and the shared language of TISUK enabled this increasingly rich flow.

Donna Jones, Assistant Head, was told in a in a reflective focus group that there were *"happier staff and happier kids"* Donna says *"everyone was on the same bus, the same journey. We were doing it together and we were noticing the biggest impact minute by minute"*.

As well as the rich learning, staff valued and made full use of the opportunity to be away from school together, to reflect for themselves about their role, the impact of working with such significant needs and the impact for them personally. They learned a lot about themselves and were able to reflect on both their personal and professional process.

All staff fully grasped the importance of play. They were actively engaged in playful activities with pupils, wrapping language around the experiences. Again Donna commented, *'Staff were fantastic with all that they were doing, just fabulous. It validated all that we knew was important. We could see the impact it was having across the whole setting'*.

Staff reported that the school was calmer. Where there had been an air of volatility previously, now there was an air of safety, containment and connection. However, when incidents occurred where there was a risk to the safety of learners and/or staff they could be dealt with using techniques gained from Team Teach training that fits within the element of 'Protect'. Restorative conversations with an Emotionally Available Adult would always follow.

Sarah commended leaders at the school who enabled this transformation to take place. Leaders' response to the initial consul-



*'Joining Greenhill-School is a fresh start for our students and we pride ourselves on being able to provide a personalised and bespoke approach to helping students to overcome the numerous challenges they face.'*

Shane Mock Head-teacher

*'Greenhill is a school that will help you make progress in all ways. It is a safe and happy place to learn with lots of help to set you on the road to a good life.'*

Pupil written prospectus

*'It's not something you do, it's a way of being,'*

Sarah Penny, Family Theapist

tation with staff epitomised the TISUK principles of respectful relationships built on trust and listening. It established an ethos at every level within the setting that continues to be tangible for all.

'The welcoming of our therapy dog 'Pan of the Wild' into our classroom with learners facing social, emotional, and behavioural challenges has offered an array of invaluable benefits. Pan fostered and cultivated a calming atmosphere, noticeably reduced stress and anxiety levels among our learners, thus fostering a more nurturing learning environment. Pan's non-judgmental and unconditional love has encouraged learners to open up emotionally, which has led to improved relationships, well being, communication and self-expression. Additionally, interactions with the therapy dog promoted empathy, compassion, and responsibility, instilling crucial life skills in learners.'

James Rowlands, Science Coordinator

Staff enjoy opportunities to play together and have organised events that evoke laughter and fun.

And the TISUK training continues. The school sees this as an important investment and, in some cases, a gift that might pay dividends elsewhere but which will benefit children in the future. Integral to a whole school approach all staff receive internal TIS training and almost all staff, including administrative staff and the school Barber, who offers sensory experiences such as grooming hair, nails and wellbeing activities to pupils, have undertaken the Diploma. The school has the ambitious aim that every member of staff will soon be diploma trained within a rolling programme of ongoing professional development.

This TIS community reaches beyond the school, welcoming parents for events and activities and delivering outreach for the hardest to reach pupils.

The work of the school was celebrated in the most recent Estyn Report following an inspection in 2023

'Greenhill school is a very caring and nurturing school with pupil wellbeing at the heart of all of its work. There is a strong culture of respect between staff and pupils and staff are sensitive to their needs. This caring atmosphere contributes well to pupils' positive levels of wellbeing, their personal development and the standards that they achieve from their individual starting points'.... Leaders promote well-being highly effectively across the school community. They ensure that all staff have a secure understanding of the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences and foster positive relationships across the school. Leaders and staff act as strong role models for pupils. As a result, pupils show high levels of respect to each other, visitors and staff at the school. This is a notable strength.' (Estyn Report, 2023)



*'It is not something you do, it's a way of being,'*

Sarah Penny, Family Theapist