THE LASER APPROACH

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Introduction

The LASER Approach stands for Low Arousal Supports Educational Resilience, and is designed to be applied in a wide variety of educational settings by teachers, support workers and families. The LASER Approach was developed through Studio 3 Training Systems in 2019 as a new way of supporting young people to achieve their full potential. The basis of the approach was developed through supporting autistic young people, and although this is referenced throughout the chapter, the approach is applicable for all learners with additional needs and diagnoses. The key difference between this approach and other methods is primarily that resilience is not 'parked within the child, 'and applies more widely to the environment as a whole and the adults who are supporting the young person. As our colleague Elly Chapple would say, 'flipping the narrative 'is a key component of this approach (2019). This means focusing on what is within our gift as parents, carers and professionals, rather than attempting to change the behaviour of the child through a prescribed approach.

LASER has a strong evidence base, building on the practical experiences of educators as well as the voices of young people and their families. Co-production and communication between the individual, their family and the school/setting are core elements of the approach. LASER can be adapted for a wide range of educational settings, from mainstream schools and specialist settings to young people who are educated at home. The approach provides an academic and practical understanding of key theories related to autism, distressed behaviour and arousal mechanisms, including:

- Low Arousal (McDonnell, 2019)
- The Saturation Model (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011)
- Co-production (Morewood 2017; 2019)
- Constant Consistency (Morewood, 2018)
- The PERMA Model (Seligman, 2011)

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- Reflective Practice (Schon, 1987)

The LASER Approach centres around a practical focus towards eliminating the use of restrictive practices and seclusion by implementing Low Arousal Approaches within a whole-school/setting framework. Combining this with positive practice and excellence in de-escalation allows for a completely different model of working, valuing each individual's needs and goals. Working within a person-centred framework, the LASER Approach to supporting individuals in educational environments focuses on stress reduction and co-production to enable every young person within the school to benefit.

Overall, there is a strong focus on the importance of stress reduction and well-being for all members of the school community – including staff, parents/carers and pupils. The individual elements of the programme can be customised based on the needs of the school or organisation. For example, a focus on restraint reduction may be a key area of concern for one school, but less necessary for another. As such, the contents and focus of the programme can be adapted based on an analysis of the requirements of the organisation or school in question.

This chapter represents some of the key concepts that form the LASER Approach. Due to the personalised nature of the approach, it should be viewed as an overview rather than a prescribed approach. In this chapter, we will attempt to explore the key components - theoretical and philosophical - which underlie the approach, and thus demonstrate how all these elements work in unison to create a support network around the young person and throughout the setting as a whole.

The implementation of the LASER Approach is very much about the individual setting; different foci will form key areas depending upon their unique requirements. For example, a young person receiving education in the home will require different emphasis compared to a small rural school, and similarly so for a large international school. The key is to set out a philosophy and support a journey in which there are real alternatives to improving outcomes for learners, wherever they receive their education.

Low Arousal

The Low Arousal Approach is a philosophical and practical approach to crisis management developed in the early 1990s (McDonnell, McEvoy & Dearden, 1994). Based on the concepts of physiological arousal mechanisms and stress, this approach focuses on stress reduction, the behaviour of supporters and reactive crisis management strategies to create calm environments. De-escalation is at the forefront of Low Arousal, and non-aversive strategies such as strategic capitulation, co-regulation and non-verbal cues are used by supporters to communicate calmness and non-confrontation. The original definition of the approach has evolved from its inception as a philosophical,

'common sense 'approach to supporting someone who is distressed, to a practical method of working with stressed and often traumatised individuals with behaviours of concern (McDonnell, 2019: p.149):

'A Low Arousal Approach is almost the opposite of 'zero tolerance 'approaches, which encourage boundary-setting and assertiveness in the face of verbal or physical aggression. Instead, Low Arousal means tolerating behaviours that you may be inclined to want to change, and accepting that the first priority is often not the behaviour of concern itself, but the underlying causes such as stress and trauma.'

The Low Arousal Approach has been applied in a variety of care settings and with a range of individuals with additional support needs, including intellectual disabilities, autism, acquired brain injuries, older adult's services and mental health services. Whilst the Low Arousal Approach is primarily employed as a crisis management strategy, its effectiveness in reducing caregiver stress and creating calm environments has seen it adopted as a way of life within many support settings. This approach has been successfully adopted within a number of special and mainstream schools throughout the UK, using a whole-school approach to stress reduction, reducing environmental stimuli, and examining the causes and circumstances surrounding crisis situations, including staff's own contribution to challenging incidents. Low Arousal within the classroom and other education settings means that every child is given the space and time to learn in a calm environment that enables them to flourish.

Stress and Arousal

There is a very clear link between stress and physiological arousal (McDonnell, 2019). Arousal mechanisms are an unconscious part of our day-to-day processes, and our perception of these mechanisms and ability to control them disintegrates the more stressed and hyper-aroused we become. The autonomic nervous system can be divided into two parts; the sympathetic and parasympathetic. The sympathetic nervous system powers the basic processes that affect our fight or flight responses. The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for slowing the body down, such as when the body is resting. Stress and high levels of arousal trigger the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in increased levels of adrenaline and cortisol in the blood. The implications for this in practice are wide-reaching, for supporters themselves and the individuals being supported. Stressful environments (such as busy classrooms with lots of noise) heighten our senses and levels of physiological arousal, and can lead to moments of crisis, dysregulation, and behaviours of concern.

By focusing on how stress and arousal interact with one another as well as with external factors, the Low Arousal Approach anticipates how arousal mechanisms can be impacted throughout the day, and works to create space

and moments of calmness. De-arousing activities need to be built into the school day in order to allow young people to calm down and learn to self-regulate when they feel themselves becoming stressed or restless. Exercise is a great way of doing this by structuring fun, engaging physical activities into the school day, and has been proven to improve cognitive functioning (Bidzan-Bluma & Lipowska, 2018). Regular cardiac exercise has also been shown to improve not only physical well-being, but also to reduce stress (Alghdier, Gabr & Aly, 2015). This makes it an excellent, pro-active intervention for students, staff and caregivers alike. Mindfulness and relaxation can also be useful tools for reducing stress and arousal in the classroom, and it is helpful to take a 'mindful pause 'in moments of crisis before rushing into action. When people are under high levels of stress, they tend to make poorer decisions, therefore building stress-reduction practices into daily routines and schedules should be a key focus.

Co-Regulation Enables Self-Regulation

The ultimate goal with Low Arousal is for the young person or individual to eventually learn to recognise their physical needs and identify their stressors in order to pro-actively respond to them before they reach a critical point. However, in order for self-regulation to occur, supporters role-modelling calmness is a critical first step. The transactional model of stress demonstrates that stress, like happiness and other emotions, is contagious (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This means that when a pupil is distressed, their stress can impact on their supporters, causing them to also become stressed and aroused, and vice versa. Supporters should be aware of unconsciously transmitting their own stress onto the young people they are supporting, particularly during moments of crisis. Maintaining calmness – or, at the very least, the appearance of calmness – is essential to prevent situations from escalating (McDonnell, 2019: p. 245):

'By remaining calm and adopting a Low Arousal Approach, you are creating an opportunity for the distressed person to have time to self-regulate.'

This means, to a certain extent, allowing distressed behaviours to occur. This can seem counter-productive, and at times may feel like 'giving in, 'but the reality is that engaging in confrontation will inevitably cause the situation to escalate. Shouting at, restraining, or reprimanding an individual in distress will only cause everyone's levels of stress and arousal to elevate. It takes a great deal of calmness and confidence to use strategic capitulation (or 'giving in'), as this goes against many of our instincts and learning around behaviour. Low Arousal challenges practitioners to deconstruct their preconceptions and firmly-held beliefs about challenging behaviour, and forces us to examine *why* we find some behaviour so challenging. The reality is that some individuals need to engage in 'challenging 'behaviour as a means of self-regulating. Screaming,

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swearing and destroying property may seem to be behaviours driven by anger and violence, but in many cases these behaviours are the only way young people are able to alleviate their stress. Asking ourselves why an individual might *need* to engage in a behaviour can help to shift the focus from changing their behaviour, to helping them to manage their stress and arousal levels.

De-Escalation Excellence

The key to successful de-escalation is stepping back, being compassionate, and allowing the individual time and space to calm down. There are many steps that can be taken to reduce social and environmental stressors in order to reduce the likelihood of an individual becoming distressed in the first place. When a situation does begin to escalate, there are a number of factors that could be contributing to their levels of stress and physiological arousal. Consider:

- The environment (e.g. loud noises, unpleasant smells, other people in close proximity, temperature)
- Demands being placed on the individual (e.g. to finish a task within a certain time frame)
- Physical needs (e.g. hunger, thirst, tiredness, pain)
- Social pressures (e.g. interaction with others)

By observing the various and interacting contexts in which behaviours of concern occur, we can better understand their causes, and thus reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence. Considering all the extraneous factors that might be impacting a person's behaviour and mood means that we can address these discomforts and potentially avoid a crisis. The De-escalation Checklist from *The Reflective Journey* (2019) by Professor Andrew McDonnell is a useful tool to consider when situations become stressful. It encourages professionals, teachers and supporters alike to consider the following questions (pp. 204-205):

- Can we reduce stress in the person's immediate environment?
- Can we give the person a break?
- Can we make their world as predictable as possible?
- Can we increase the person's sense of control over their environment?
- Can we simplify communication?

Thinking outside of the box and anticipating the needs of the individual are important tools for avoiding a crisis. Sometimes, this can mean allowing individuals to escape from the classroom and go to a designated safe space to calm down. Other times, when the individual is too distressed to remove themselves, the rest of the pupils in the class can be moved to a different area to allow the individual space. This is known as planned escape, and is an incredibly useful tool to implement into whole-school policies and practices so

that everyone in the school knows they are allowed to take some time out without reprimand if they feel themselves becoming dysregulated.

Low Arousal Micro-Skills in Educational Settings

The key to Low Arousal is appearing calm, and this can mean many things in practice. It is possible to train individuals in Low Arousal Approaches and thus, over time, triumph over their sympathetic 'fight or flight 'reactions to crisis situations. There are also steps that educational professionals and family members can take to *appear* calm during crises, even if they do not necessarily feel calm. There are a number of Low Arousal 'micro-skills 'that can be used to communicate calmness and create a non-aversive atmosphere. These include non-verbal cues, which are often the first to be interpreted when a person is distressed. Avoiding direct eye contact, physical touch, and slowing your movements down are gentle, non-verbal ways of communicating that your intentions are not to get into a confrontation with the young person. Avoiding gathering staff in a crisis is also recommended, as the more onlookers there are, the more stressful and arousing the situation can become. Multiple staff members 'ganging up 'on an individual in a crisis can be incredibly intimidating for the young person, and can be a subtle and coercive means of control. Staff should be careful about the power signals they communicate, other through their own bodily posture (e.g. towering over a young person, pointing their finger, being physically threatening) or through their collective presence in the side-lines.

Additionally, peer groups of onlookers should also be removed from the situation where possible. Studies in psychology have demonstrated a phenomenon called social facilitation, more commonly known as the 'audience effect, ' whereby people tend to behave very differently when they have an audience (Strauss, 2002). This can cause situations to escalate further when peer groups are present as onlookers. Being aware of how these environmental and social factors can be a catalyst to incidents escalating, and preventing this from happening is a key skill for Low Arousal practitioners.

The Saturation Model

One of the most important, challenging and controversial aspects of any system of education for learners with additional or specific needs is improving experiences and outcomes. This is often hindered by systems that reinforce significant disadvantage. The Saturation Model was developed over a decade ago as part of an ESRC funded project with the University of Manchester (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011). The model was initially developed with the sole purpose of including autistic learners who had been excluded from or were unable to attend previous educational settings. It is useful to note again, that although initially developed to support autistic learners, this model has been successfully used to support many different learners in settings glob-

ally, through direct training and ongoing support from the first author over the last decade.

The outcomes of this study resulted in every young person who participated going on to education, employment or training, and provided a 100% success rate regarding the aims of the project. Since its inception, the Saturation Model has been developed further as part of the LASER Approach, and is a key element of this eclectic and person-centred approach.

As with many things in education, there is of course no 'silver bullet. 'Students and learners with additional needs share as many differences as they do similarities, and to expect a single approach or intervention to meet the needs of all is, at best, naïve. However, the Saturation Model is a good investment for improving outcomes, as demonstrated by its success within a number of settings across the globe.

The whole-school Saturation Model can be seen to build a bridge between the 'high, hard ground 'of academic research and the 'swampy lowlands 'of real-world educational practice, and has been the subject of much interest within the context of training and whole-school development over the years (Marshall, 2013).

What Is the Whole-School Saturation Model?

The Saturation Model provides a framework for a whole-school approach, and was originally developed to illustrate principles for the effective inclusion of autistic learners in a secondary mainstream school. However, it is arguably equally applicable to all educational phases and contexts, and has been applied to many schools and settings, both in the UK and abroad, during the last few years.

The word 'saturation 'is deliberately used to emphasise the need for autism-friendly principles and practices to permeate every aspect of school life. Prominence is also given to the integration and co-ordination of strategies, with the hope of avoiding a fragmented, 'programme for every problem 'approach, which is neither cost-efficient nor sustainable (Domitrovich et al., 2010).

The model is consistent with the two primary theoretical tools that informed the work. Aligned with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecosystemic theory, the model highlights the importance of micro- and meso-system inter-relationships (e.g. the peer group and classroom) at its core, while also drawing on more distal, exo-system influences (e.g. school systems, policy). Direct support and intervention take account of both individual and group differences.

The following graphic demonstrates the core elements of the Saturation Model as an approach to supporting what is 'within our gift 'of influence as professionals. Some of the core principles of the Saturation Model are outlined below.

Figure 1. The Saturation Model (Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011)

The Agent of Change

The central and starting point of the model is the 'agent of change. 'Typically, this would be the Special Education Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCO) within a school, but it can also apply to the primary educator – parent, carer or teacher. There are many debates as to the need for this role to also be a member of the school's leadership team, as this may be a crucial factor in determining whether the proposed innovations 'take hold.'

The agent of change pushes thinking and practice forward, and can often be met with resistance. As such, energy, resilience, and good humour are useful traits for the agent of change to foster, alongside the ability to be a 'solution broker 'within the context of the system or setting.

Peer Education and Awareness

The role played by peers in determining the educational experiences and outcomes of autistic (and indeed all) learners is vital. We can support and educate peers in several ways. Firstly, we can improve peer awareness (and subsequently attitudes and behaviours) by providing students with accurate information about autism and other neurodevelopmental conditions. The work of Campbell and colleagues, which draws upon social persuasion theory, provides a theoretic framework for considering the role of peer awareness (Campbell & Barger, 2014). Credible, likeable sources of information which are recognised as having authority have been identified as more persuasive. In a school context, this may be a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) who has significant influence with the students. In terms of message, educators should

highlight similarities between students with and without autism, using explanatory information to increase understanding and provide guidance on how students can interact with and support their fellow students. This can be supplemented by exploring the achievements of autistic individuals and hearing 'first-hand 'from those with real, lived experience.

Secondly, given the inverse relationship between social support from peers and experience of victimisation and loneliness, peers can and should be used as a protective resource (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). An example is the Circles of Friends approach, in which a small group of typically developing peers form a support network around a focal child. Evidence from a range of contexts suggests that this system may have specific benefits for autistic students and their peers. However, it is also important to take into account the preference (or need) for solitude expressed by some autistic children and young people. Peer social support systems should therefore be a resource which can be drawn upon when needed rather than being forced upon individuals. This is where the application of different approaches in a 'medicalised manner 'leads to normalisation; applying approaches in a personalised way is one of the core elements of this model, hence the requirement for the agent of change.

Thirdly, given the greatly increased risk of victimisation associated with autism (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014), interventions that directly address bullying are warranted. A useful starting point is to build upon what is known about bullying prevention in general by students and staff within the setting. Unfortunately, the effects of bullying interventions are not always practically significant, and are more likely to influence knowledge and attitudes than actual behaviour (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross & Isava, 2008). However, approaches which include a component targeting students deemed to be 'at risk 'appear to produce slightly better outcomes (Ferguson, Miguel, Kilburn & Sanchez, 2007). Whitted and Dupper (2005) note that 'the most effective approaches for preventing or minimising bullying in schools involve a comprehensive, multilevel strategy that targets bullies, victims, bystanders, families and communities '(p. 169). This is very much in keeping with the 'saturation 'approach outlined as part of this model.

Direct Support and Intervention

Direct (individual or small group) interventions are also required in addition to a systemic whole-school approach to effect significant change. Interventions need to balance a consideration of individual needs with the profile of strengths and challenges associated with themselves as individuals, as well as other important contextual factors.

A systematic review of the literature on autism education highlighted a large body of evidence for interventions with a range of foci (Bond et al., 2014):

- Joint-attention
- Social interventions
- Play
- Communication
- Challenging behaviour
- Flexibility
- Pre-academic/academic skills
- School readiness skills
- Cognitive skills
- Motor skills
- Adaptive and self-help skills

This and other reviews (Parsons et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2013) have demonstrated that the majority of the available evidence relates to children rather than autistic adolescents. Much less is therefore known about effective interventions and support for autistic children in secondary school settings. Furthermore, the various reviews have pointed to peer-mediated interventions as offering particular promise in the promotion of social skills (whilst also potentially improving peer understanding of and attitudes towards autism).

Although some interventions reviewed were implemented by researchers, school staff can effectively implement a range of interventions following some initial training. This has obvious implications for both the cost-effectiveness, impact and sustainability of such work.

Direct support and intervention can also be an effective means through which to prevent or reduce victimisation of autistic children and young people, and is particularly effective when developed as part of a whole-school approach, for example with speech and language therapists and psychologists as part of the school-led provision (Morewood, Drews & King, 2016).

Flexible Provision

A pre-requisite of effective practice in the whole-school Saturation Model is flexibility in provision. As noted earlier, despite their sharing of common characteristics, no two students are the same, and provision therefore needs to reflect this diversity of need. For example, some students may be better placed in teaching groups that suit their individual needs (e.g. positive role models and the need for good quality, structured teaching) rather than their 'perceived 'ability in a given subject. A person-centred approach is essential to enabling diverse and comprehensive support tailored to suit individuals 'needs and abilities. The development of this area as part of the LASER Approach is often an important part of support for school settings.

Routines and Rules

Incorporating Low Arousal principles as part of the Saturation Model means being aware of environmental stressors and changes in physiological arousal, and allowing for fluctuations in concentration, ability and arousal levels as the day goes on. Children and young people's daily timetables need to be adaptable and allow time for them to withdraw from lessons in which they feel that the cognitive and/or social demands are too high. Scheduling these moments of escape and calmness provide an excellent opportunity for specialist support and intervention of the kind noted above, and also builds stress reduction and de-escalation into the daily routine of the young person. These should, ideally, be pro-actively planned as part of Stress Support Plans, not reactively implemented at moments of crisis.

Being reasonably flexible with school rules is also important. For example, some learners may experience disturbed sleep patterns and can arrive to school late. Such cases require staff to be empathic, and understand that rule-breaking behaviour is not always within the young person's control; indeed, after a poor night's sleep our coping responses can be fewer than previously, so things we managed on week may be more challenging in this moment. Allowing the young person time to get settled in a designated area and provide them with the tools to express their readiness to join the class. Engaging in metacognitive approaches is an important element of this way or working and, ultimately, leading to self-regulation.

In some cases, flexibility of provision may even extend to students to having dual-roll placements through the development of formal partnerships between mainstream and specialist schools. The proportion of time spent in each setting can be reviewed periodically and adapted as necessary, with the flexibility allowing for that on a day-to-day and week-by-week basis, thus truly personalising the provision. This approach moves beyond polarised, simplistic debates about whether mainstream or special educational settings are 'the most appropriate 'for students with additional and specific educational needs

(Mesibov & Shea, 1996), recognising that a student's needs, and how and where these are best met, are subject to change. Of course, the feasibility of such an approach is highly dependent on local contextual factors, including:

- Availability of funding (although these arrangements cost almost one third of the cost of a full-time specialist placement in reality)
- The existence of different forms of provision or placement
- Relationships between placement sites

Building these kinds of systems and partnerships can have multiple, wide-ranging benefits, particularly regarding the personalisation of provision and outcomes in preparation for adulthood.

Training and Development of Staff

Our personal experiences indicate that teachers generally have positive attitudes towards autistic children and young people with additional needs, but report difficulties around social and emotional understanding. These tensions can often influence the quality of their interactions with students, and potentially undermine the development of positive relationships which underpin learning in the classroom. Effective training and development is therefore crucial. Within a Low Arousal Approach, the relationship between supporters and individuals is of utmost importance, and it is essential to foster empathic, trusting and therapeutic relationships.

The Saturation Model advises that training should be 'regular, on-going and part of a commitment of all staff . . . a one-off twilight session (or training day) is never going to suffice '(Morewood, Humphrey & Symes, 2011: p. 65). It is our view that this process should begin during initial teacher training and, where possible, should include placements in specialist settings. In addition to better preparing teachers for practice, it may also have the added benefit of increasing a sense of personal responsibility for the learning of all students, particularly autistic learners, rather than this being viewed as the sole responsibility of support staff or the school's special education specialist.

It has been reported previously that less than 15% of teachers received any autism-specific input during their initial training (Morrier, Hess & Heflin, 2011). Significant change is required in this sector, perhaps as part of a general shift towards more explicit and detailed consideration of special educational needs during the critical developmental phase in teachers 'careers. Although high-quality empirical evidence is currently scarce (Alexander, Ayres & Smith, 2015), there are indications that where autism input is, 'strategically placed within the confines of a teacher training program, [it] can both significantly increase participants 'perceptions and knowledge of autism [. . .] as well as reduce overall stress and anxiety levels '(Leblanc, Richardson & Burns, 2009: p. 166).

Why Constant Consistency Matters

Often, more and more problems arise for schools and other settings when consistency and a 'whole-school 'approach are lacking. Systems need to be put in place, through policies and procedures, that are supportive of plans and individuals. Fragmented practice and provision can fuel dysregulation and increase stress throughout the staff team and within the school as a whole. Consistent, calm approaches are hugely effective, and this requires a collective and unified approach from management and frontline staff alike.

The concept of corporate responsibility (Morewood, 2018) was developed as an extension of the Saturation Model and means, in essence, that everyone within a school or setting shares the responsibility for any agreed aims or goals. For schools, this is often established through strategic school development plans for the year and onwards. Clear plans help to ensure that pockets of 'good practice 'are not undone by inconsistent whole-school provision and systems.

Having a calm, consistent and purposeful learning environment in one classroom, contrasted by a stampede down the corridor when class ends, creates a very dysregulated experience and environment for pupils. These inconsistencies can mean significant stress for students who find these less structured times extremely challenging. It can also be stressful for staff who reactively attempt to calm students down and get them to stop running or shouting. Consistency has to be constant to allow effective learning to take place - both in the classroom and outside of it.

One of the key elements of the Saturation Model is ensuring a clear link between policy and practice, as a disconnect can create opportunities for fragmentation of provision and structure. After all, no-one is harmed by calm, consistent, positive approaches.

Calmness and self-control are connected. In applying the Low Arousal approach to teaching and learning it is all about the culture within the classroom, founded upon a good understanding of stress and consistent proactive approaches. Maintaining a calm, consistent learning environment, applying what the evidence would suggest is a good investment in learning, creates a purposeful environment that allows everyone the opportunity to thrive. It is important to remember that nobody fights when they are feeling calm and relaxed, and actively creating calm environments reduces the likelihood of crisis situation developing. Whilst these Low Arousal environments are especially beneficial for students with addition support needs, they also do not harm other pupils, and therefore help to improve outcomes for all.

The Importance of Co-Production

Co-production means facilitating open and honest communication between all parties involved in the young person's well-being, including family, carers, educators, other professionals and, crucially, the young person themselves. This enables a collaborative approach, suffused into every aspect of the young person's life to achieve a holistic and unified support system. With the well-being of the young person at the core, a truly co-productive network of support can improve outcomes for the young person and their family. Keeping parents and carers informed, providing honest communication and listening to supporters improves outcomes for all, and increases parent/carer confidence (Morewood, 2017). Working together with a shared, solution-focused goal empowers families and young people, and enables them to flourish within a robust and unified support system (Morewood, 2019).

Claire Ryan, a parent and Speech and Language Therapist, identifies co-production as a partnership based on trust and respect, and therefore concerning issues such as (Morewood, 2019):

- Power imbalances
- Identifying and removing barriers
- Identifying and utilising skills
- Distributing workload and roles fairly and appropriately
- Identify joint goals and outcomes
- Respect for all input
- Inclusion

Respectful and trusting partnerships are essential for the success of the LASER Approach, with particular regard to the young person's whole day, not viewing school and home separately, but truly working collaboratively.

The PERMA Model

The PERMA Model, developed by Martin Seligman (2011), provides a positive psychological framework for focusing the positive elements of life and actively fostering moments of happiness. Positive psychological principles place a strong emphasis on well-being, and can be a useful way of re-framing discussions around behaviour to focus more on addressing the causes of distress (Dodge et al., 2012: p. 230):

'In essence, stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa.'

The PERMA Model identifies five key components to achieving overall psychological well-being and happiness. These five elements are considered essential for all people to promote well-being and achieve fulfilment.

1) Positive emotions

Positive emotions such as happiness help to boost our immune system and improve our overall feeling of well-being. Happiness - like stress - is contagious, and encouraging students to share their positive experiences can help to shift the focus away from negative feelings. The 'three good things 'exercise is a useful tool to use with students to help them focus on positive experiences and feelings (Rippstein-Leuenberger, 2017).

2) Engagement

Engaging in hobbies, activities and exercise helps people to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals. Encourage pupils to identify and engage in flow activities that help them to focus and de-stress, and try some out yourself!

3) Relationships

The importance of positive relationships in people's lives cannot be overstated, and many studies have shown that supportive connections are associated with greater wellbeing (Dickerson & Zoccola, 2009).

4) Meaning

Having a sense of belonging, setting and achieving goals and feeling connected to life and the world is another essential component in Seligman's PERMA Model. An important part of this is having a sense of control over your own life. This means empowering young people to make decisions, set goals, and engage in activities that have meaning for them.

5) Accomplishment\Achievement

Feeling a sense of accomplishment is also important for our overall well-being. Celebrating the achievement of goals and daily successes within the classroom increases pupils 'confidence and their overall well-being.

When supporting young people with additional needs, their overall wellbeing and happiness should be an important factor, as people are less likely to present behaviours of concern or 'meltdowns' when they are in a happy and stress-free environment. Working to strengthen overall psychological wellbeing has been proven to reduce stress, increase coping, and prevent behaviours of concern from becoming more challenging by pre-emptively stopping them in their tracks as part of a supportive, personalised framework.

Being A Reflective Practitioner

The key to good practice is self-reflection. The Low Arousal Approach requires practitioners to constantly reflect on their own contributions to challenging situations, which can be quite difficult for some people. Understanding the children and young people being supported, seeing them as individuals and empathising with them is an essential component of the approach, and this does require an open and honest dialogue with everyone and with yourself as part of a co-produced approach about how they can better supported moving forward. When a crisis does occur, ask yourself what steps you could have

taken to de-escalate the situation before it got out of hand. Once they have calmed down, ask the young person how they needed your support in that moment, and how they can communicate that to you in the future. Remember, no-one learns when they are stressed and highly aroused. Learning can only occur after the incident has passed.

There are many reflective exercises teachers, carers and other professionals can engage in to help them take stock of how a situation unfolded, and how their own behaviour may have contributed. *The Reflective Journey* (2019) is a comprehensive guide for practitioners that centres around the core concept of reflective practice within a Low Arousal framework. Professor McDonnell here advocates for a greater understanding of why behaviours occur, and how important it is to be empathic practitioners and view individuals as being highly stressed, rather than 'badly behaved 'or 'acting out. 'Seeing the stress, and often trauma, also means accepting that highly distressed individuals are often not in control of their behaviour, thus shifting the focus from their behaviour to ours (McDonnell, 2019: p. 188):

'In these circumstances, carers may think of solutions that focus on their own behaviour rather than manipulating the individual's behaviour.'

These moments of reflection and emotional decompression after an incident are important in order to take the next steps necessary towards preventing future crises.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the core elements, theory and philosophy of the LASER Approach (Low Arousal Supports Educational Resilience) has been outlined. Due to the unique nature of the approach, it is important to reemphasise the personalised manner by which LASER is applied and developed within different settings and educational establishments.

It should be noted therefore, that due to the personalisation of the approach (supported through coaching and supervision) to different settings and individuals, the precise methodology will differ from setting to setting. A core part of the approach is ongoing support and coaching, which can be 'in-house ' or as part of an ongoing relationship with Studio 3 Training Systems. Full details of the LASER Approach can be found at www.studio3.org.

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