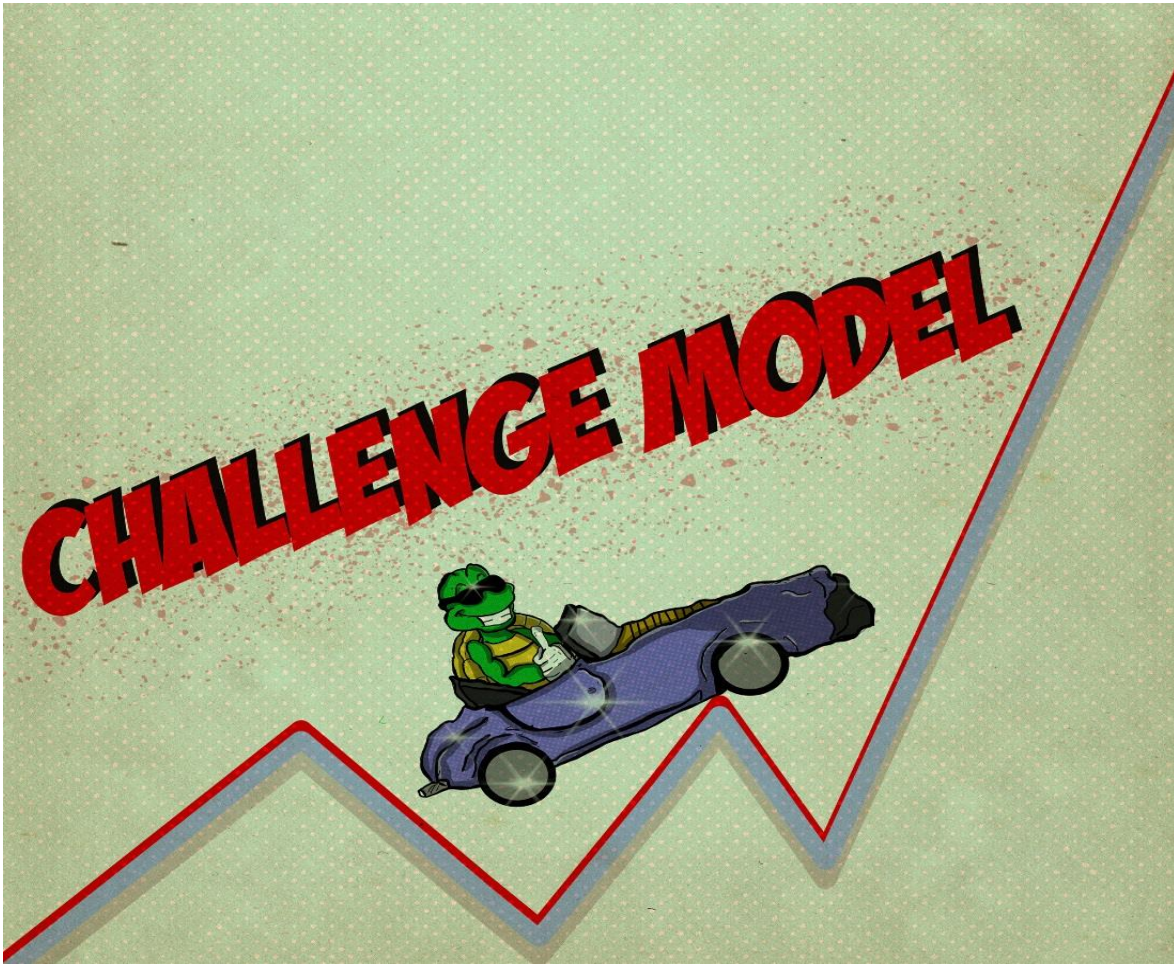


WHAT WORKS? ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE MODEL USED AT ROYAL FREE HOSPITAL CHILDREN'S SCHOOL

Views from the students



(Picture created by Ray Fowler, student at The Royal Free Hospital Children's School)

Introduction

The Royal Free Hospital Children's School (RFHCS) has a cohort of outpatient students undertaking a GCSE programme. Many of the students may experience Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR). Reasons relating to EBSR can be explained in terms of 'push' (those that push the child away from school- bullying, exam pressure) and 'pull' (those that pull the child away from school- bereavement in the family, illness of family members) factors. There are usually multiple factors that interact to develop into EBSR. The fundamental feature of EBSR is anxiety alongside school-refusal behaviours, this is exemplified in appendix one. The RFHCS has a pupil agreement which includes three elements, namely: co-operation, contribution and consideration (for self and others). There is an emphasis on the children taking responsibility with support from the adults, and an expectation that the student and the staff members are 'holding the line together'. The Headteacher does not believe in the school simply being a 'safe haven' but instead a supportive, safe place where the students are also expected to put in high levels of effort to develop and grow, ready for the next steps of their life. The aim is to increase students' sense of belonging and the ethos is that 'nobody gets left behind' and each student's emotional and academic development and progress is carefully monitored.

Reasons for carrying out this analysis and review are three fold:

1. The RFHCS has had three successful years. Success defined by the cohort of students attending at higher rates, students achieving at least one grade of progress, 95% of children are still in post 16 study after leaving the school, and after one term, 60% are engaged in level three courses in 2018/19.
2. The GCSE programme cohort may be moving site from within the hospital to another building.
3. The RFHCS is also likely to have an increased cohort of young people.

For the reasons noted above, the review sought to answer the following questions.

Question 1: What are the elements that support success in the RFHCS?

Question 2: What are the threats to moving building?

Semi-structured feedback

To gain students' views qualitatively, the Mentimetre presentation software was used to gain anonymised information in a group setting. This was used to gain the students' views in an unprompted way, in a hope to elicit unbiased views.

Students were first asked 'Use three words to describe the RFHCS'. There were seven students available for this part of the feedback session. The following is a screenshot of the words, with the larger the word meaning that it was stated more often.



It is clear to see that 'supportive' is the most stated word, with helpful and kind as the second and third most stated words. The words reflect a nurturing, positive environment with words such as 'inspirational' and 'challenging' perhaps reflecting the high expectations of the staff team, and the challenge model (please see appendix 2).

The second question asked was 'What is it about this school that you think is positive?' the following screenshot presents the individual comments.



The above comments clearly themed into: the areas of support, friendly environment, and the individualised approach taken. Again, there is a theme of an overarching theme relating to a nurturing ethos.

Structured feedback

The Q Sort technique is a self-contained 'qualiquantilogical' methodology that aims to explore human subjectivity

The stages of a Q methodological study include:

1. The researcher generates a set of items (the Q set) which are derived from the overall field of knowledge surrounding the topic. The items are usually statements, which are rateable by individuals in terms of the extent to which they agree with each one. In this evaluation, the statements were generated from school practitioners' comments about what they believed to be effective.
2. The statements are placed on cards for participants to sort on to a Q grid according to a specified criteria (e.g. from 'most

agree/most helpful' to most disagree/most unhelpful'). Through sorting the cards, participants provide a model of their viewpoint.

3. Each column of the grid represents a discrete numerical rating and therefore through engaging in the sorting process, participants assign a numerical value to each item. The gestalt array of statements produced by participants is analysed to reveal patterns and commonalities in participants' responses (and thus participants who share similar viewpoints).

A sample of twelve students in Year 10 and 11, males and females took part in this part of the feedback. Data were analysed so that each statement was given a possible score out of a maximum 100. The statements could then be ranked in order to reflect the most useful to the majority of students. The tables and graphs are shown in appendix three.

Pastoral elements

The pastoral elements viewed as most helpful by the students are represented in the diagram below. The top five ranked elements are then further analysed.

There is an expectation that there is no bullying

The majority of students placed this as one of the most helpful aspects of school. This is significant because, much of the research relating to EBSR, indicates that bullying is an often-cited factor for 'pushing' young people away from school (Emmerson et al. 2004, Kearney et al. 2006, meta-analysis). Bullying behaviours are generally seen within a social context rather than a simple dyadic relationship and can be described as interpersonal aggression (Swearer and Hymel, 2015). The fact that students found this to be the most important of all of the

statements indicates that the feeling of social safety is fundamental to the success of the school.

Timeouts are allowed when needed

Students clearly value the fact that they are able to temporarily escape an environment that might be causing emotional dysregulation, or preventing them from managing overwhelming feelings. It is likely that this supports them in developing constructive ways of managing feelings and enables students to reach an emotional state that is manageable for them. Students who are able to do this are less likely to reach high arousal states for sustained periods of time and subsequently, less likely to feel that they are not able to manage school generally. Research also shows that when young people are able to manage their emotions, they are also more likely able to use areas of the brain that support learning (attention, memory etc). It is important to note, however, that these are limited and students are generally expected to increasingly manage their feelings within the group setting. The reason for this is to ensure that the students do not use 'escaping' or 'avoiding' as ways of managing emotions. There is likely a balancing between supporting the students to manage emotions independently and allowing them some time away from group settings when it is needed.

I know there are adults I can talk to when I need

The importance of adults being consistent and available to talk is seen as the third most helpful aspect of school. It is a long accepted fact that students who are able to access supportive adults when needed are therefore able to access a secure base, which enables young people to feel safe and contained. The availability of trusted adults who offer an 'emotional base' as consistent attachment figures within the school environment, is likely to support the students in accessing the emotional support needed to increase availability for learning. There is a lot of research to evidence this but it is perhaps summarised

most succinctly by Paul Greenhalgh in his book Emotional Growth and Learning:

The factors affecting the capacity for learning are related to the capacity for relationship. In order to enable such children to improve learning, one has to pay particular attention to processes of relationship.

Adults encourage positive friendships and relationships

Students placed this aspect as the fourth most helpful aspect within the school environment. Within the research relating to the reasons for young people finding schools difficult to manage and feeling anxiety towards being there, often centering on difficulties in managing social interactions and the social aspects of school. Perhaps this might be related to social anxiety. The point is that an ethos that encourages and supports positive friendships and relationships is viewed as helpful for the students in this review. It is likely to support feelings of social safety, trust and positive inter-personal experiences.

We are treated like adults with responsibilities

This aspect is something arguably unique about the RFHCS. The Challenge Model; a positive challenge to young people, which aims to result in increased attendance, punctuality and engagement in school for students. This links with the accepted fact that students presenting with EBSR often have a history of 'escaping' or 'avoiding' anxiety-provoking situations, which serves to reinforce negative thoughts about school and increasing feelings of anxiety. Being assertive and sensitively challenging students to develop strategies to manage their feelings of anxiety has been shown to be an effective strategy for intervention (Kearney and Bensaheb, 2006). This statement also provides insight into the students' thoughts about their capacity as young adults to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour.

Academic- most helpful

The academic elements viewed as most helpful by the students are represented in the diagram below. The five ranked as most helpful are then analysed further.

Adults focus on individual progress not our academic results

This was ranked as the most important aspect. This is an area in which there has been a recent increase in evidence. Focusing on effort and the strategies used to progress towards their goals rather than on the goal/ outcome itself is likely to encourage a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset (Dweck). Dweck and her colleagues describe this as 'process praise', which shows students that they can develop their abilities and it suggests how this can be done. Research by Dweck indicates that process praise increases students likelihood of persisting when tasks become challenging. Perhaps meaningful and individualised process praise reduces the anxiety around academic pressures.

Exam times are calmer than in other schools

It is well evidenced that exam times provoke feelings of anxiety in students. For students who already experience strong feelings of anxiety, these times can be particularly challenging. The support put in place by the RFHCS during these times, which includes early preparation and personalised approaches, is evidently valued by the students.

Adults know what will help me in my exams

Similar to the statement above, students rate adults' ability to ensure that they have the correct support for their exams, highly. It is interesting that two statements linked to exams are rated within the

top five for students. It is clear that students value the carefully planned and calm approach to exam times and this is important to maintain going forward.

Smaller class sizes

One of the significant factors to young people feeling unable to attend school is negotiating the multi-faceted aspects of the school system (Emmerson et al. 2004, Kearney et al. 2006, meta-analysis). Smaller class sizes are likely to increase feelings of safety and this is something that is valued by the students in this analysis.

Lessons are interesting

The motivation to learn and feel engaged within lessons is an important aspect to education. Students rated this statement as the fifth most important aspect to school. It makes sense, that if students are motivated to learn, they will feel more engaged in the process and achieve their potential.

Summary and next steps

What are the elements that support success in the RFHCS?

A major theme throughout the feedback is the significance of safety because of the importance placed on an anti-bullying ethos. The importance of safety is also evident through the students placing high value on being able to access safe spaces for time out. The importance of smaller class sizes, and the calmer exam environment, all point towards the students' valuing of safety.

It is clear that the students value the nurturing and containing approach provided by the staff team. There is also a strong theme of the promotion and value placed on the interconnectivity between the students. These elements together, are likely to have enabled students

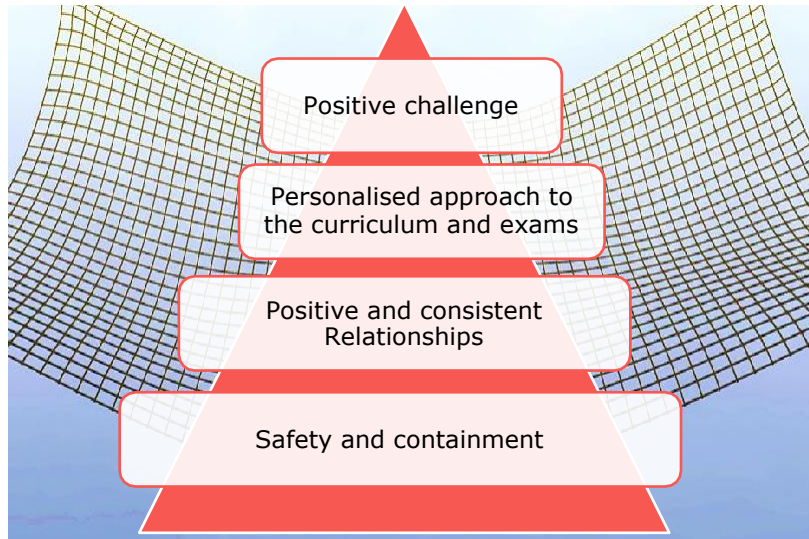
to aim higher for their achievement and the way in which they manage their emotional wellbeing.

There is also a theme of there being an individualised, sensitive approach to the curriculum, particularly in relation to exams.

This analysis suggests that the positive challenge model is successful because of the foundations of interconnectivity and safety. The following diagram represents these themes. The positive challenge model requires the foundation elements in order to be successful.

The positive challenge model expects students to change behaviours while putting the support foundations in place to enable these changes in behaviour. This first provides the 'safety net' to enable students to feel safe to change and provides them with the 'tools' to initiate and, importantly, maintain the changes. It seems that there is a balance needed to enable the students to grow in independence and develop the skills needed to manage emotions. Perhaps the importance is on shifting students from an 'escape and avoid' mindset to managing anxiety in the moment. Perhaps the RHHCS environment enables pupils to develop these skills in a safe, supportive setting before moving on.

The findings from this research generally reflect the school ethos and the pupil agreement while offering some points for reflection.



What are the threats to moving building?

The threats to moving building are linked to the elements that students believe are supporting them most. The elements above must be put into place to enable the effectiveness of the school system across pastoral and academic curriculums. The diagram above provides a view to how this would be achieved. Changes present particular challenges to the safety and containment elements but careful consideration can minimise the risks.

Next steps

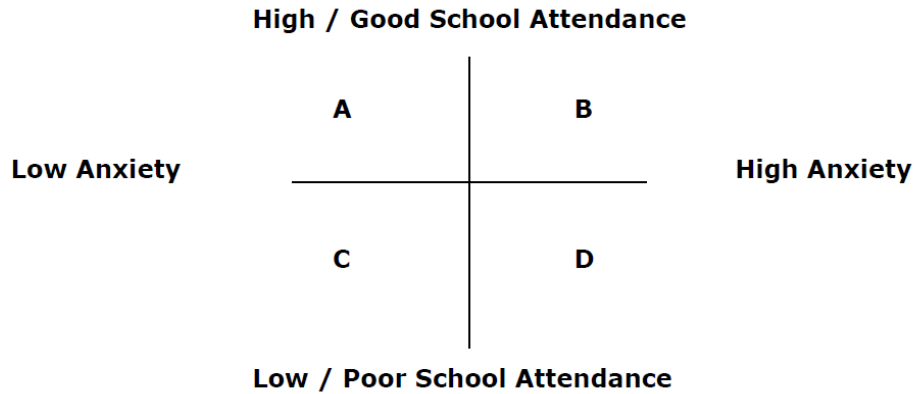
- It would be useful to take this information and conduct an appreciative enquiry model with the staff team to establish a plan for maintenance of the effective systems and manage for the possible threats.
- It would also be helpful to gain student view on the outcomes of this research. This will be done by speaking with two students who were not part of the original data gathering. These students will be asked to offer some further ideas to develop ways forward.

Appendices

Appendix 1: characteristics and causes of emotionally based school refusal, adapted from Emmerson et al, 2004

TWO FUNDAMENTAL FEATURES OF SCHOOL REFUSAL

Two fundamental features of school refusal are the presence of anxiety, which can be a great disorganiser of behaviour, and non-attendance at school. The following diagram illustrates the relationships between anxiety and non-attendance.



- **A** – The majority of the school population in that they are not anxious.
- **B** – Children who are very anxious but do manage to maintain school attendance.
- **C** – Children who may be considered as truants in as much as they have low school attendance but do not show anxiety as the major factor leaning to their non-attendance.
- **D**– Children who are highly anxious and feel unable to attend school. These are the children considered to be anxious school refusers.

Appendix 2: RFHCS Positive challenge model

Positive Challenge

A common difficulty that our young people face is Emotionally Based School Refusal (EBSR). This may manifest itself in students finding reasons not to come to school, or asking to leave school early, because of feigned illness; a sense of being treated unfairly or sometimes a genuine anxiety based illness. All of these issues present a need for a sensitive approach on the part of staff but may also require a response of positive challenge, on the part of staff, to avoid these student behaviours becoming entrenched and worsening over time.

We often need Parents support in explaining our approach and our aims to a young person and to support us in maintaining school boundaries and rules.

We have developed a strategy of positive challenge to young people which aims to result in increased attendance, punctuality and engagement in school for students.

For many students this means they have to change their behaviours, often in the face of unpleasant emotions such as anxiety or other mental health challenges. They will always embark on change with full support from us. We often ask them to be brave in holding steady, staying at school and working through their difficulties.

During the school day, in our experience, pupils who experience EBSR may attempt to avoid lessons through genuine anxiety related behaviours, feigned illness, overt disengagement from study or complaints that they are being dealt with unfairly. In such situations there is nonetheless an expectation that pupils will stay at school for the whole school day and try to manage their difficult emotions with support from staff and in observance of the school rules.

We advise that in these situations:

1. *If the young person is trying to get **Attention** with acting out behaviours:*
 - *Staff are trained to contain young people's emotions and behaviours by regulating their own responses and emotions, remaining calm and providing students with clear and firm boundaries (in line with school rules). This is to provide an environment in which pupils can effect personal change.*
 - We also offer, where possible, a quiet safe place in which young people can take time to make alterations to their thinking.*
 - Offering a young person attention from support staff (if required) is also often an option.*
 - We also make sure it is noticed when the person is trying to get attention appropriately and that staff respond positively to these changes.*
 - Staff interact with the student regularly, giving them plenty of opportunity to get positive attention*

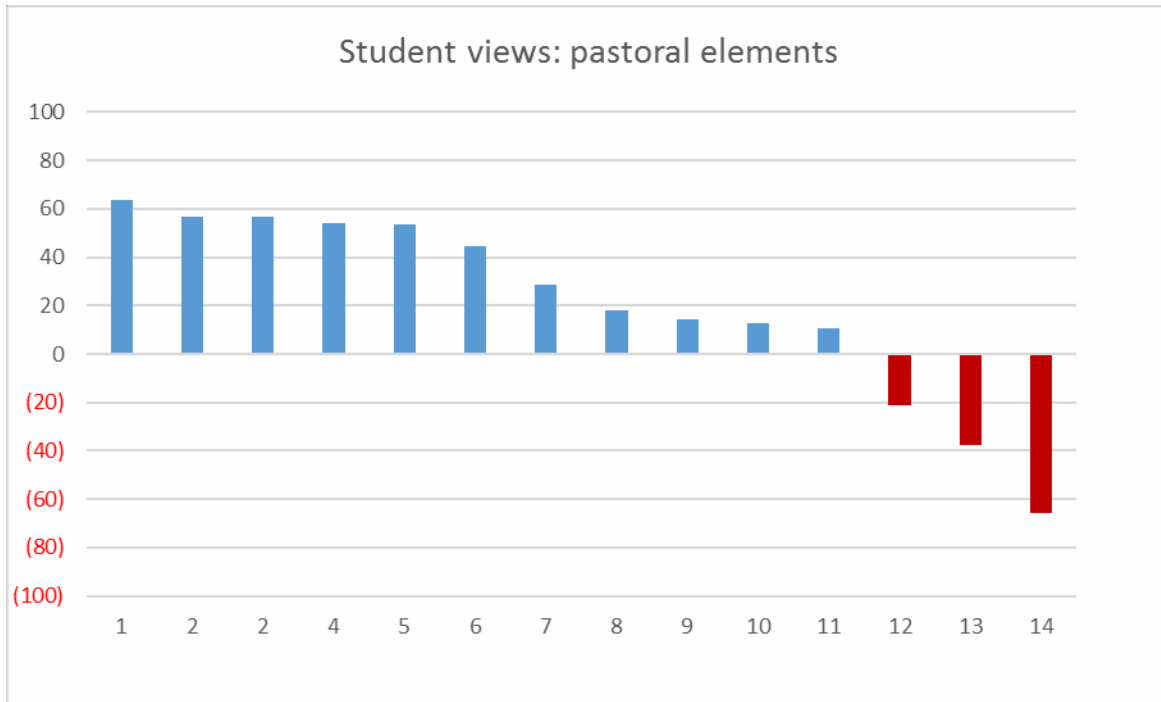
- We remind them of the progress they are making*
- We provide quality time with their tutor at times of challenge*

2. *If the person is displaying behaviours to attempt to **Escape/Avoid** something or someone:*

- *Give the person an effective way to stop something they don't like; to remove them from a situation or situation they don't like until they have strategies in place to cope.*
- *Teach them to make choices in an assertive way and to say "yes" and "no"*
 - Introduce them to a situation/activity gradually to help them become used to it*
 - Use humour as a way to distract the person*
- *Notice when they are displaying 'early warning signs' that they may be becoming unhappy or anxious and ask them to describe the problem before it manifests.*
 - Change the way we ask them to do something to avoid confrontation.*
 - Engage them with Thinking Cards to help them analyse helpful and unhelpful thinking patterns*
 - Provide quality time with their tutor*

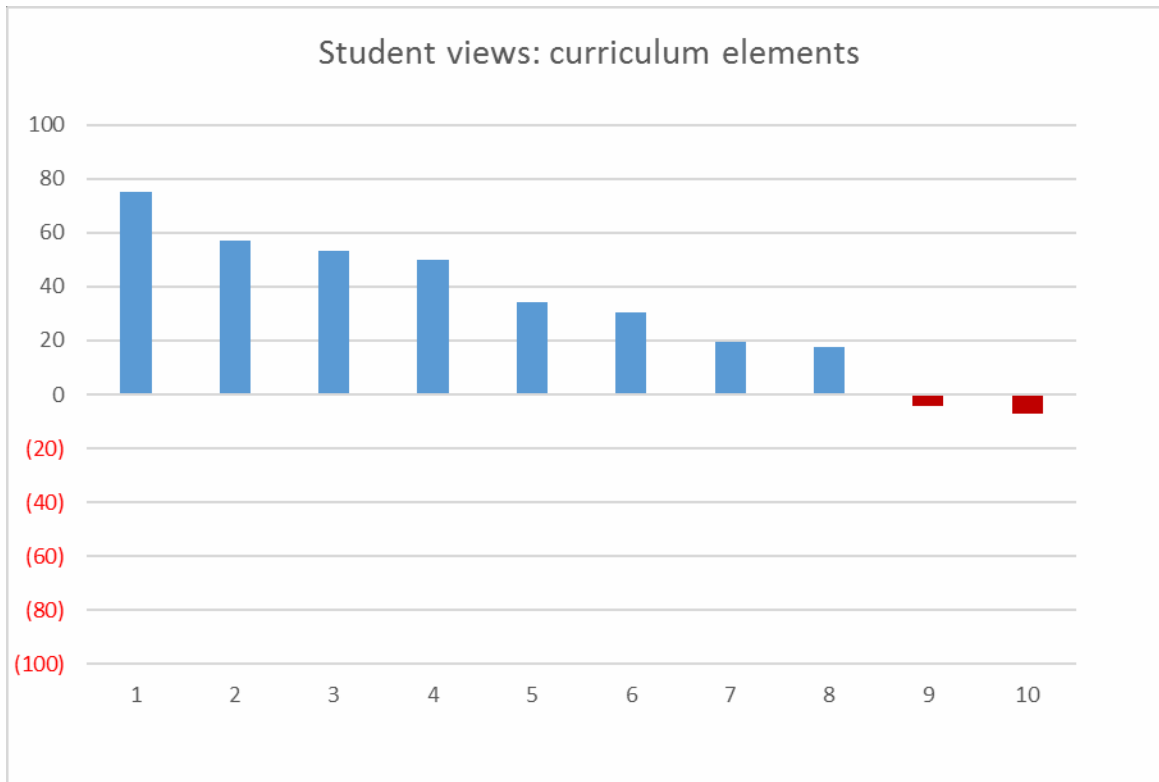
Appendix 3: Data tables and results graphs

Pastoral elements



Rank	Description	Score
1	There is an expectation that there is no bullying	64
2	I know there are adults I can talk to at any time when I need	57
2	Timeouts are allowed when needed	57
4	Adults encourage positive friendships & relationships	54
5	We are treated like adults with responsibilities	54
6	There is an expectation that we support each other	44
7	My tutor understands my needs and how to support them	29
8	The school ethos: having a mental health or physical health challenge is not a reason to not come to school	18
9	Adults in school meet with my parents each term	14
10	Meeting with head teacher before I start	13
11	Adults know me and what I need	11
12	Contact with parents daily if needed	(21)
13	Use of resources to think about emotions	(38)
14	No phones allowed	(66)

Curriculum elements



Rank	Description	Score
1	Adults focus on our individual progress not our academic results	75
2	Adults know what help I will need for my exams	57
3	Exam times are calmer than in other schools	53
4	Smaller class sizes	50
5	Lessons are interesting	34
6	Mental health is seen as a challenge but not a barrier to academic progress	31
7	Google drive for learning at home	19
8	High number of adults in the classroom to help with learning	18
9	We have opportunities to talk together about our emotional wellbeing in lessons	(4)
10	We can learn subjects other than GCSE (so more choice)	(7)