

La Passerelle Skate School January 2024

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Abstract

A six-week observation of 3 students during weekly Skate School sessions. Sessions were held at an outside skatepark and inside during wet weather. The three students chosen to attend were struggling with the transition from primary SEMH school to secondary SEMH school.

Inspiration

I have used the Tavistock Model of Infant Observation to observe the way the skate school students relate to each other, the adult skate coaches and to themselves. I have tracked the progress of individual students weekly. I have taken inspiration from the 'Push to Heal' program in Hull, this program used **Dr Bruce Perry's Neurosequential model** to understand the healing capacities of skateboarding. Skateboarding addresses the **four areas of brain development that may be compromised during early traumatic experiences**, which may lead to an insecure attachment style. Skateboarding addresses the brain development in order (sequentially), building the lower levels of the brain, to then access the higher cognitive functions. This is ESSENTIAL for addressing the effects of trauma in the long term.

I was interested to see how the four areas of the brain can be accessed simultaneously during a skateboard session.

Firstly, the lower brainstem is stimulated during the **sensory aspects** of skateboarding, such as the vibrations of the board on the ground through the feet and up the body, the experience of rolling, hearing the wheels on the ground and feeling the wind in the face.

The second part of the brain to be stimulated is diencephalon, this is during **pattern making**, the **repetitive behaviour** of pushing the board to move, and pumping the board up a ramp.

Third is the limbic system, where the **relational skills** needed to function within the group are addressed, empathy is developed through the celebration of successes and accepting failure, which is so much part of the culture and etiquette.

Finally, the complexity of the neocortex is addressed, while students develop the **cognitive functions** required for learning new tricks and complex skills on the board.

Over the years, I have noticed that the criteria for acceptance in the social hierarchy of the park is primarily perseverance. **Courage, combined with perseverance is celebrated, and failure is part of the process, as in life.**

The culture of skateboarding incorporates the **visual arts**, film making, photography, graphic design, music and fashion. This element is particularly important as an extra layer of therapeutic intervention (an alternative way to reach young people who have experienced trauma).

Keywords: Rolling, balance, regulate, sensory, perseverance, failure, transition, friendships, and focus.

Autumn Term 2023

This project was a response to two Key stage 3 students struggling with transition to their new school, they had been excluded from their new school by the November of 2023. Both students had existing struggles with emotional regulation (suggestive of developmental trauma), which significantly impacted on their ability to form friendships, and their ability to feel safe and learn in school. They had both been put on a part timetable which meant they were **at risk from social isolation and restricted learning opportunities**. These students were energetic, had difficulty managing their emotions and were physically and verbally violent towards staff and other students. Their presentation was suggestive of Complex PTSD and a disorganized attachment style. A third student was added to this group, student 3 had recently transitioned up to the same school and was finding the change difficult, they had a less violent presentation, but they were finding it difficult to access learning and were challenging to reach. Student 3 responded well to the skatepark but attended less of the sessions.

Phase1 - Week 1 – 6 November/December 23)

During this initial phase I intended to factor in **as much continuity as possible**, we kept the same staff each week, same times and the two identified students (plus Student 3 who came along less regularly). When we had to make a change due to weather we gave as much notice to students as possible so they could process the change.

Week 1. We started off in the sports hall due to wet weather, the skate coaches were in the hall when we arrived. Student 1 travelled up from school in the car, and Student 2 met us at the sports hall. The journey was challenging for student 1, they did not want us to talk to them at all. All

boards, helmet pads and small ramp were provided by the Skate coaches. There was resistance from both students towards putting on helmets and pads. The adult skate coaches were calm and patient, both students put on helmets and pads. Student 1 showed natural talent, skated around independently and energetically, showed real confidence in their body, showed courage and confidence in attempting tricks.

Student 2 was able, they clearly wanted to impress the coaches and **stayed close to their chosen coach. The students stayed away from each other in this first session.** Student 2 fell and then sat out; I felt they **could not recover emotionally from their fall.** They were quiet and on the 'side lines' of the activity. Student 2's mother collected them from the sports hall at the end of the session and we travelled back to school with student 1. The journey was challenging for them, they did not want any interaction from us, and initially refused to put on their seatbelt. We stopped the van and waited until they were ready to put on their belt. Session 1 was a good start; the journeys were challenging (transition).

Week 2. We were in the sports hall again due to wet weather and the park being too wet to ride on. Student 1 was initially very 'stirred up', trying to dominate the group, they were aggressive towards school staff (not the skate coaches), they said, 'don't look at me!'

This behaviour may suggest that everyday events 'signaled danger' to them. Both students wanted the same skateboard, student 1 refused to share, student 2 was very patient, a compromise was eventually reached, but student 1 rescinded. Student 2 threw his skateboard against the wall twice. The second time the student threw the board against the wall, the coach said, 'don't do that,' in a calm voice.' The student did not do it again.

Student 1 pushed their skateboard in the way of the skate coaches. I experienced this as, them being provocative, this was a dangerous action, they were also skating too close to student 2, and in an intimidating way. Three quarters of the way through the session, the two students came together, supported each other, and completed a trick together. Student 2 was patient with student 1, and it felt like they understood student 1's difficulties that day. I wonder if student 2 recognised student 1's behaviour, they recognised the difficulties experienced and communicated by the other student? Student 2 was collected from the sports hall by their mother and student 1 travelled back in the car. We dropped student 1 home after the session. Again, they could not tolerate any talking from us on the way home

Week 3. Student 3 joined us for this session, they had been invited from the beginning and decided to join us this week. We travelled up with student 1 and student 3, and we met student 2 at the skate car park. The weather was dry, so we met the coaches at the car park before heading over to the skate park together. It was a beautiful sunny day. Student 1 was dysregulated before we set off, they shouted in student 3's face (which they tolerated), and student 1 was moving around the school and the playground at speed. I was mindful of keeping my verbal interactions with them to a minimum. I used my facial expression and physical presence to show my interest. **Student 3 generally avoids eye contact and social engagement; they talk extremely fast using aggressive, and often misogynistic language. I often cannot hear or understand what they say. The sentences feel like repeated sounds they have heard rather than formed words and created sentences from thoughts (perhaps an example of echolalia). I am left with the feeling they may fear about connection (due to not understanding what is expected**

perhaps), or they do not understand the language being used. As if, their response is a way to shut down the interaction quickly.

During the drive up to the park, the students sat separately, student 1 let us know they did not want us to walk around or say anything to them during the skate session. They sounded young and pleading; they were clearly thinking about what they needed before the session began. When we arrived, student 1 got padded up quickly (no resistance), and they did not take long to choose a board. Student 2 greeted student 1, student 1 tolerated it. Student 3 stayed silent, student 3 copied the other two students and put on their helmet and pads.

Student 3 stayed close to one of the skate coaches (they chose a coach of the same cultural heritage as themselves). Student 3 stayed close and waited for his attention before they attempted anything new, they looked so young and undefended, they smiled and stayed focused for the whole session. It was delightful to see.

We met student 2 in the carpark, I greeted them, and they said, 'fuck off!' I made a note to **keep my words to a minimum and use other ways to communicate**, Student 2's anxiety was high. Student 2 found it difficult to choose a board and get started, they were extremely interested in the Skate coaches, they were shouting and wanting to impress. Student 2 had forgotten their water, so we agreed to walk over together to collect their water. On their return, **they joined student 1's attempts on the ramp, they provided commentary and support throughout Student 1's attempts at the trick. Student 1 tolerated this in a way they couldn't in previous weeks. The skate coaches were modelling the etiquette of support and patience.**

On the drive home, student 1 was **relaxed and initiated connection**. They wanted us to notice what they noticed out of the window. **Shared attention. Progress.**

The skate coach was attempting to help student 1 with a new trick, student 1, hesitated but then accepted the help, **I had not seen them accept help previously**, by the third attempt they had achieved the trick independently, they mastered the trick very quickly. They rode around the park alone but did not join with Student 2 or 3.

Being in the park encourages a different relationship to the space/environment and less on each other, the skate park area is much larger than the sports hall. Student 1 set themselves up right at the back of the park (as far away from where we sat as possible). They were assisted throughout by Luka (Skate coach), they could not achieve the trick at speed, they had to slow down. **I wondered if student 1 enjoyed being close to Luka, Luka held their hands repeatedly. Student 1 found it difficult to leave at the end of this session, they were joyful.**

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Week 4. We have all three Students, and the weather is good enough for the park, it is bright and sunny. All students put on helmets and pads with ease and quickly choose a board each. Student 2 showed **they wanted to connect to coaches right away, initiating conversation** and looking up to them, **student three avoided eye contact, they kept their head down** but waited for Lois (the coach he was with previously). **Student 3 stayed physically close to Louis and made considerable progress, they smiled, and they could tolerate us celebrating their successes.** Student 1 was so eager to get going, they set off and continued to attempt the ramp from the previous week. **Student 1 was joyful and confident, mastering the ramp and progressing at speed.**

Week 5. Wet weather, student 1 found it **difficult to leave school** and student 3 refused. We left school with Student 1, and met Student 2 at the sports hall, they were waiting for us with their mum when we arrived. **The atmosphere was charged,** student 1 was quick to get started, **they sped around the room with speed, student 2 was more 'held back', keeping an eye on student 1, student 1 was verbally aggressive and skated too close to student 2, student 2 was patient and careful.** Student 1 had pushed their board in the way of one of the coaches' tricks, they wanted to start a fight. **I chose to end the session early. Student 1 was relieved,** we all were. On the drive back to school, **student 1 was calm and wanted to connect.** They asked to speak to their mum on the phone. They were relieved to be going home to their mum and relieved that their difficulty had been recognised, and as a result, they may have felt **more contained and understood.**

I was curious about what had led to student 1 becoming so dysregulated and aggressive towards others, I wondered whether **they couldn't share the coach's attention with student 2 that day,** their behaviour felt like they were responding from a younger developmental age than their

chronical age, like a toddler meltdown (they needed an adult to help them regulate), **they couldn't hear or think, they needed our help to understand what they needed.**

Week 6. When I arrived at school there was a change in the support teacher and student 1 had been told they could move to another group (a second group was due to begin on a Monday). I insisted on keeping student 1 in this group for continuity, they had been told otherwise, this was potentially confusing for them. The weather was good, and we managed to keep the plan the same, Student 3 refused to come. Student 1 travelled up from school and we met student 2 in the car park. **Student 2 had had some significant safeguarding issues at home. They were verbally aggressive when we met in the car park; they did not want me to look at them.** We headed over to the park and both students got padded up and chose boards quickly. **Student 2 wanted to connect to the skate coaches,** 'I've got my new skate shoes on!'

Student 1 was gliding around the park on their stomach, using the board as a surfboard. Both students wanted to try the same ramp, **they supported each other, cheered, and gave each other high fives.** We all gathered around and watched as they attempted the ramp. It was difficult for both students to leave the park, student 1 wanted us to leave first and they agreed to skate past us to the car park. It got cold. Students enjoyed being filmed doing their tricks, particularly student 1, **they were proud of their achievements.**

Conclusions

During the initial six weeks of Skate School, I have seen how **Students 1 and 2 have become more regulated as they skate, they have focused and progressed and been able to tolerate more difficulty. They developed their social skills, supported each other, are kinder to themselves, show much less aggression towards staff and listen to the Skate Coaches. They attempt new and more difficult ramps and tricks, they use less aggressive language, they cheer each other on when something new is mastered. Both Student 1 and 2 have been independently going up to the skate park in between sessions and working on their skills.**

Student 1 can manage the journeys up to the park and on return (transitions), they initiate conversations during this time and **want to connect (shared experience)**. This is a significant development from the beginning of the project.

Student 2 has significantly **reduced their aggressive language and outbursts within the** and have started to say please and thank you. They are focusing on **sophisticated skills** for the whole session and are **not being interrupted or distracted by Student 1**. They can share the space and share the attention from the adult Skate coaches.

Student 3 has made less progress. They attended fewer sessions. They may feel 'left behind' as Student 1 and 2 have made considerable progress which may bring up difficult feelings. **I wonder about the level of language understanding of student 3, they continue to avoid eye contact, they talk very quietly and at speed. Their words are difficult to understand, and not fully formed. Their sentences feel like repeated sounds rather than composed thoughts, it feels as**

if they want verbal interaction to end as soon as possible, before looking away or down at their feet. I get a sense of a child 'in hiding.' I have seen them smile when completely focused on balancing and rolling on the skateboard, their skateboard skills have developed, which would suggest **they have developed the ability to connect to themselves, but I have not seen a progression with their ability to relate to others.**