

HEART: A safe space to repair broken dreams.

A reflective report on the first 6 years of a bespoke mental health provision set within a specialist school environment.

Background:

West Heath School currently has a designation of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. However, even previously when our designation was Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD), we have always had young people with mental health difficulties dispersed throughout the school. Our success with these young people in the past has been variable depending on the severity and complexity of their needs.

Four students in particular stick in my mind from 2014. Each of them had significant mental health needs but were expected to cope with lessons and transitions around the school. My days were often spent trying to help teachers understand the young people's difficulties and teaching the student strategies to get them through the day. I was sure that we would have been able to support them better with the right approach and understanding. So, in 2015, realising that we were getting more referrals for young people with complex mental health needs, and discovering that there was very little educational provision for young people leaving psychiatric hospital other than returning to mainstream schools, I suggested that we set up a bespoke mental health department. This would avoid the need for these vulnerable youngsters to cope in the main part of the school and likewise for staff to cope with them. After visiting several hospital schools, my idea was that suitable students would receive both their education and pastoral care within a therapeutic, nurturing environment with specialist staff trained to cope with their needs. In essence, I envisaged it to be a step down from a hospital school which aimed to help young people make the transition from psychiatric hospital back into education.

At that time, HEART (Health, Education, and Revitalising Therapy) referred to a department set up in 2009 to encompass our Therapy team and our Induction team. Based in the Castle (at the 'heart' of the school), new students would spend time learning the ropes within the safety of our Induction team, whilst therapists could assess and carry out therapeutic work throughout the school. At that time, our therapy team was considerably smaller than it is today consisting of just a Speech and Language team and a CBT therapist. By 2014 it had expanded to include a Counsellor, an Occupational Therapist, a Complementary therapist, as well as myself as a Chartered Child and Adolescent Psychologist.

At the end of 2015 our first HEART students started. We had just two to begin with: A girl and a boy – both suffering from complex mental health difficulties. The girl's anxiety was so high that it took five attempts for me to even interview her – but eventually it happened during the school holidays when it was very quiet onsite. She

had recently been discharged from psychiatric hospital which in itself had traumatised her. In the early part of 2016, two other students joined us. Again, both had significant mental health needs including high anxiety and depression. By September 2016, our numbers started to really take off and by July 2017 we had reached 15 students, and had a staff team of 6 comprising a HEART teacher, A HEART Tutor and four keyworkers.

By now it was becoming very clear that we needed more space, so in September 2017 we transferred to the top floor of C block (with some of the therapy team) which gave us more room to cope with the ever-increasing referrals we were receiving. At this point, HEART became the name for this department, and Induction and Therapy became separate entities. My plan was to ensure a calm and nurturing environment with access to a designated suite of rooms to allow our students to study in areas where they could feel secure and relaxed, with therapeutically designed classrooms, a welcoming common room, and an inviting kitchen for students to use. The majority of lessons would take place in HEART with teachers from the main part of the school coming over to us to deliver lessons. This meant that students did not need to transition around the main school, thus considerably lowering their levels of anxiety. For lessons such as PE and Art, bespoke sessions just for HEART students were put in place thus minimising the need for mixed lessons with the main part of the school.

Many of our students at this time were very creative, and one of the main events that took place in the autumn of 2017 was our Christmas Fair. This involved all our students – and staff - either using their artistic or creative skills to make products to sell (such as Christmas cards or small gifts), using their culinary skills to bake cakes and cookies, using their woodworking skills to help make stalls, or manning the stalls when all the staff and students from the main school were invited to visit us. It was a great success, and not only did we raise funds for a local charity, but it also gave us an opportunity to work together as a team and to demonstrate what HEART was all about. One of our former students told me that it felt as though we were one big family - albeit a somewhat dysfunctional one!

Despite only moving to our new space in September 2017 (the top floor of the old KS5 building), by Easter 2018 it was becoming increasingly clear that we were already running out of space again. Our numbers escalated from 15 to 27 students in a very short space of time, and with only one allocated classroom, and all core lessons taking place in HEART, it became obvious that more classrooms were needed, particularly as we often had three different science lessons happening simultaneously! As a result, I requested that an additional three classrooms were provided for us so that all learning could take place downstairs in HEART, freeing up the rooms upstairs for arts/crafts, independent study, life skills, and quiet spaces. I also needed to reclaim the staff room (which had been taken over for teaching) for our hard-working staff when they needed to make confidential calls to parents or write reports.

Since then, HEART has continued to grow and flourish despite the rollercoaster that it sometimes feels like. At least four of our former students have gone on to university and many others have succeeded in their chosen walks of life. The majority have left us with a good selection of qualifications whether it be GCSEs, BTECs, Functional Skills, or NCFEs. Most recently, in the summer of 2021, two students achieved their BTEC Level 3 in Art and Design with Distinction (this is the equivalent of 3 or 4 'A' Levels at A grade which is no mean feat!) Occasionally students need to return to hospital, but we continue to support them and welcome them back when they are ready to return to us. During lockdown, we remained open throughout: About 15 of our students continued to come in on a daily basis whilst we supported the remainder by daily phone calls, on-line learning, and therapy.

So, what does HEART look like now in November 2021?

In March of 2021, it had become clear that we were again running out of space, so the remaining therapists made a move back to the Castle. This provided HEART with a few much-needed additional quiet rooms. At the time of writing, we currently have 30 students (with others waiting to join) with a complex mix of diagnoses including anxiety, depression, OCD, psychosis, eating disorders, gender identity disorder, bi-polar, schizoaffective disorder, emotionally unstable personality disorder, and Tourette's syndrome; additionally, many of them self-harm and express suicidal ideation so our staff need to be vigilant at all times. Whilst on their road to recovery when they join us, they are all still incredibly vulnerable and very fragile in their emotions. Our ages range from 14 – 20 (Years 9 – 15), and all are average, or above average, cognitively. A typical profile of a HEART student is: Female, aged between 15 and 17, possibly ex-Grammar School, with a history of psychiatric hospital/significant mental health difficulties. In contrast to the main part of the school, we tend to have more girls than boys (currently 18:12) and all ages are free to mix together at all times. Lunch is a sociable affair for our students (our lunch is delivered to us in HEART to avoid having to queue in the main school), although some prefer to spend quiet time alone or with their keyworker, maybe going for a walk or reading a book. Generally, all the students are extremely supportive of each other, whatever the difficulties, and make new students feel welcome. Unlike the main part of the school, HEART students are not educated in their chronological year groups so are not under pressure to sit their GCSEs in Year 11, so for example, we have a student in Year 15 who through no fault of her own, has been unable to access her GCSEs yet but is hoping to do so next summer. In addition to the core subjects and options (which are taught by curriculum teachers usually in HEART), all HEART students have the opportunity to develop a range of life skills such as cooking and using public transport. They also have the opportunity to gain a qualification in ASDAN. Our older students have a choice of attending college whilst either remaining under the HEART umbrella or transferring to our 6th Form if they are ready; alternatively, we offer BTECs (Levels 2 and 3) in Art/Textiles, and (soon) ICT

on-site. We currently have three students attending North Kent College supported by our HEART Tutor, who are doing exceptionally well.

In terms of our current staffing the team consists of myself (Head of HEART and Therapy), the HEART Manager (who oversees the day-to-day smooth running of the department supported by the Assistant HEART Manager), a HEART Tutor (based at North Kent College), a Curriculum Lead (who oversees all the academic provision of our students), three core subject teachers (English, Maths and Science), an ASDAN teacher and six Keyworkers. We are eagerly awaiting two new Keyworkers in January to backfill others who have moved on to pastures new, and hopefully a new IT/Creative Media teacher. Our team is not only experienced but all either have, or are in the process of gaining, their NVQ Level 3 in Mental Health.

Thoughts for the future:

For HEART to improve and continue to grow (it is, after all, a very lucrative part of the school!), we need three vital ingredients: Space, staff, and a better academic offer. In terms of space, whilst I am reluctant to expand too much (32 is the absolute maximum in our current circumstances), more and more of our students have a requirement for a 'quiet' room and we simply don't have capacity for 30+ individual rooms. There is also the longer-term possibility that we could set up a 'junior' part of HEART to cater for younger students with significant mental health difficulties. At present I cannot accept anyone younger than Year 9, because I don't feel it would be suitable to have children under 14 mixing with 20 years olds in the same space. I also don't have the teaching capacity for younger students.

In terms of staffing, a Keyworker should only have three students in her/his care, and currently some of our lovely ladies are having to juggle four or five students which is unsustainable. As already mentioned, whilst we are expecting two new Keyworkers to join us in January that will still only give us eight in total (rather than ten which we ideally need).

Finally, in terms of our academic provision, we are currently attracting very ambitious students, and so far, this term alone, have had to arrange for online courses in subjects as diverse as Japanese, Latin, Criminology, Marine Biology, Philosophy, Psychology, and Counselling! We also promised a number of our students that they could complete a BTEC in IT this year but without a teacher we have been unable to fulfil this requirement so far, although I am keeping my fingers crossed that we have finally managed to recruit a suitable teacher who hopefully will start in January/February. Moving forward, I would like to be able to offer a range of further education courses to cater for our students unable to access mainstream college. At present, if a student is not creative or interested in IT, we have very little to offer them apart from online courses which are obviously not ideal.

So, to conclude this reflective account, I can only say how privileged I feel to have had the opportunity to set up and run this amazing provision. Over the past six years

we have been instrumental in helping a significant number of very vulnerable young people achieve their dreams and it has been incredible to support them on this journey. Our reputation has grown and several hospitals (e.g. Great Ormond Street, The Evelina, The Maudsley, Kent House) are regular referrers. My thanks go to our fabulous staff team in HEART for their dedication, tenacity, and support in helping me turn an idea into reality, and to the Trustees and my colleagues on SLT for allowing me to do so.

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