

Reframing Curriculum Access for Learners with Demand-Avoidant Profiles

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THE BIG QUESTION

What were we trying to understand?

What happens when school leaders design curriculum around safety, autonomy and connection first?

WHY THIS MATTERS

The Challenge

For learners with demand avoidant profiles, access to learning is often blocked by anxiety, loss of control and low felt safety. UGS tested whether a deliberately relational, lower-demand curriculum model could increase engagement, voice and readiness to learn.

Leadership focus: remove barriers before expecting academic access.

WHAT WE TRIED

The Innovation

- Ring-fenced connection time with trusted adults to build felt safety before learning demands.
- Structured autonomy through meaningful choice about tasks, timing, spaces and regulation.
- Joint planning across teaching, SALT and clinical leadership to align curriculum and communication.

Simple model: Connection first • Choice with support • Motivation through interests.

PROJECT AT A GLANCE

Context: SEND school, 82 learners, ages 5–19.

Focus group: 3 learners with PDA profiles.

Design: pre/post single-group inquiry.

Evidence: pupil, parent/carers and teacher voice.

Leadership lens: curriculum, culture and clinical practice aligned.

WHAT CHANGED? — KEY FINDINGS

Did it make a difference?

HEADLINE FINDING

100% of learners talked about school more positively.

Key message: safety and autonomy are not “nice to have” — they are curriculum access strategies.

OUTCOME DATA

The strongest shift was in pupil voice: learners could name relationships, preferences and what would help school feel better.

Before: limited expression of likes, relationships and choice.

After: clearer voice, more positive relational language and stronger identification of what helps.

Engagement: all measured areas stayed stable or improved; 2/3 learners made choices more frequently.

PUPIL PROGRESS & STAFF FEEDBACK

- 3/3 learners described relationships or friendships more positively.
- 3/3 learners could identify likes and what would improve school.
- Staff saw more initiation, communication and exploration of options.
- Parents/carers reported some learners were more settled beyond school.

THE ACCESS PATHWAY

SAFETY → AUTONOMY → CONNECTION → ACCESS

felt safety before demand → choice with support → trusted relationships → readiness to learn

VOICES FROM THE PROJECT — WHAT WE HEARD

PUPIL VOICE

“School is fun. I talk to friends. I like the people at school.”

STAFF VOICE

Learners initiated more, explored options and used trusted adults to help navigate choice.

PARENT / CARER VOICE

Small improvements in mood and settling were reported, with ongoing complexity acknowledged.

LEADERSHIP TAKEAWAYS

1. Treat safety and connection as curriculum access requirements.
2. Design out avoidable demands before interpreting disengagement.
3. Make autonomy structured, predictable and relationally supported.
4. Align classroom practice, clinical insight and communication approaches.

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

- Created the “Buttercup” pathway: a curriculum route built around autonomy, motivation and readiness.
- Embedded declarative language and accessible choice through SALT-informed practice.
- Shifted planning from curriculum coverage to personalised access and engagement.
- Strengthened joined-up practice across education, clinical teams, learners and families.

WHAT’S NEXT?

- Launch and quality assure the Buttercup pathway from September.
- Scale approaches through whole-class cohorts to reduce stigma and masking.
- Strengthen impact evidence through wider case studies and comparison data.
- Keep pupil, family and staff voice at the centre of implementation review.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Connection is not the soft work — it is the access strategy.



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