

‘We had to rewrite the rules’

At Woodend Farm in Essex, learning how to effectively support pupils with PDA transformed learning across the whole school...

GEMMA QUANTRILL

People often ask me how I ended up redesigning almost every aspect of teaching and learning at Woodend Farm School. I usually smile, because the truth doesn’t sound very strategic or polished. It did not begin with a five-year plan, or a leadership training course, or a glossy new curriculum model. It began with a handful of children who were quietly – and sometimes very loudly – telling us: “*This isn’t working for me.*”

These were not defiant or ‘avoidant’ children, or children trying to make life difficult. They were some of the most creative, sensitive and perceptive young people I had ever met. But they were also children who had been misunderstood for a long time. Many arrived exhausted and burnt out from years of adults trying to use conventional approaches that their bodies simply could not cope with. They were not refusing to learn, they were protecting themselves from overwhelm, pressure and expectations that felt too big.

What looked like avoidance on the surface was actually anxiety rising so quickly and so intensely that even the smallest request could tip them into overload. When you are living in that state, the world becomes

a series of landmines, and school, with its routines, transitions and demands, can feel impossible to navigate.

It became clear very quickly that the old ways were not going to reach them. I made the decision that, rather than forcing these children to bend themselves into a system that was never designed with them in mind, something much simpler and far more radical had to happen – the system had to change shape around them.

“When a relational approach anchors everything, progress becomes possible”

The moment

The moment everything shifted did not happen in a classroom at all. It happened when I was scrolling through an article from the PDA Society. I reached a checklist describing the traits of pupils with a PDA profile, and a lightbulb went on so intensely that it almost startled me. Child after child flashed through my mind.

In that moment, it was not the pupils I questioned, but our approach. I knew we needed to completely

rethink what learning looked like.

Our starting point was not behaviour, or progress data, or curriculum coverage. It was safety; in the nervous system, in relationships, in autonomy, and in knowing that adults would not push, corner, or shame you for something your body was refusing to do.

That realisation is what ultimately shaped our Juniper Pathway; a sensory-rich curriculum

story, sensory exploration, genuine choice and safety.

We start with the informal stage, where everything is play-based and pressure-free. Play is not a break from learning, it is learning. It allows pupils with high anxiety to explore the world without feeling watched or judged, developing communication, imagination, problem-solving and social engagement at a pace that feels manageable to them.

As pupils grow in confidence, they move through ‘semi-formal’ and ‘approaching formal’ stages, where learning expands from child-led to more structured, adult-led activities. We do not rush them, we do not compare them, and we do not ask them to be ready before they genuinely are.

Finally, in the ‘formal’ stage, pupils begin to join other classes for particular lessons, not because someone has ticked a box saying they are ‘ready’, but because they feel ready and have built the internal capacity to manage those transitions. It’s important to note that pupils do not have to move through the stages; some may never reach formal stage and that’s ok!

created for pupils whose anxiety closes the door on traditional methods and designed, instead, to gently grow their window of tolerance, so they feel safe enough to learn.

A curriculum of possibility

We rebuilt the curriculum from the ground up by asking one simple question: “*What would learning look like if the first priority was reducing anxiety?*”

The answer became the backbone of our approach: learning through play,

Magic behind the scenes

If you sat in a Woodend Farm School classroom today, you would notice staff talk differently. We use a structure called WIN Scripts – Wonder, Invite, Notice – which softens the edges around demands and opens gentle pathways into learning. You will hear things like: *“I wonder which picture feels like the beginning...”*; *“You’re welcome to choose the puppet or the prop first,”*

and *“I notice the clue you used to order those events.”*

This is not a gimmick; it’s neuroscience. This indirect, invitational language keeps the nervous system settled. It communicates *“You’re safe. You have choices. I’m here with you.”* It lowers the sense of threat that often triggers avoidance in PDA pupils, and it works beautifully.

One of the misconceptions about low-demand learning is that it means ‘low challenge’. That could not be further from the truth. We design high-challenge tasks that are disguised inside playful, imaginative structures. During our Once Upon a Time theme, for instance, children might drive a story car across floor tiles to sequence events, join in with repeated phrases using a puppet, or take part in a press-conference style hotseating activity.

There is academic challenge woven through all of it – inference, sequencing, vocabulary, cause and effect, show don’t tell –

but the pressure is removed. Children choose their path:

- Path 1: accessible
- Path 2: stretch
- Bonus Quest: optional challenge

By offering real autonomy, we move anxiety out of the way so the learning can shine through.

Regulation first

There is no learning without regulation; every member of staff at Woodend Farm School knows this. If a child arrives dysregulated, distressed or withdrawn, we do not push ahead with the timetable. We start with coregulation, such as walks outside, sensory circuits, or simply sitting together until the storm passes.

Once the child’s nervous system settles, we gently re-enter learning with a WIN script, such as:

“You’re welcome to start with the chalks or the water tray, whichever feels easier.” In that moment, the child chooses safety and because of that, they often choose engagement, too.

Small steps, big transformations

The impact of this model is quiet, but profound. Children who once hid under tables now direct their own learning with confidence. Those who could not tolerate demands now negotiate options calmly, and pupils who felt ‘wrong’ in previous settings now feel seen, valued and understood.

When anxiety reduces, learning becomes possible. When we increase autonomy, engagement deepens and when a relational approach anchors everything, progress becomes possible. **TP**



Gemma Quantrill is headteacher at Woodend Farm School, Witham, Essex.