



**An exploration of teacher and teaching assistant perspectives of
the effectiveness of the Thrive approach for pupils at Elm Tree
Community Primary School**

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Executive Summary

Report Outline

This report outlines how the Thrive approach has benefited the children at Elm Tree Community Primary School and also identifies ways of further improving how it is implemented.

Study Design

32 questionnaires with open and closed questions were completed and returned by teachers and teaching assistants who had knowledge and experience of the Thrive approach. Three teachers also volunteered and participated in semi-structured interviews.

Key findings

31 (97%) of participants acknowledged that Thrive has a positive impact: *“We have a nurturing environment at Elm Tree anyway but I think Thrive makes a massive impact on the pupils”*. (Interviewee 2)

One theme identified was the importance of building trusting relationships which give children a sense of security within a school environment. Participants disclosed how Thrive can prevent children from going into crisis and reduce frustration within school. This is done by using specific strategies to help manage children’s emotions. It enables staff to empathise with how the child feels.

Ten (31%) participants provided examples of when Thrive had not worked effectively. Participants explained that the environment is not always conducive to the Thrive approach, for example, there is not appropriate space within school or adequate resources for Thrive sessions. Participants clarified that they felt unable to give one to one support when it was needed due to limited staffing. One to one Thrive sessions are not successful within the classroom due to other children being a distraction. It is not feasible to integrate this within the class schedule, alongside academic work.

Introduction

This project investigated the effectiveness of the implementation of the Thrive approach within Elm Tree Community Primary School. It explored teacher and teaching assistant perspectives. The broad aim of the project was to identify how the Thrive approach has benefited pupils at Elm Tree Community Primary School and to also specify ways of further improving the integration across the school day. The specific aims of the research project were to:

- identify what works well;
- identify specific barriers;
- highlight recommendations of how Elm Tree School can improve their use of the Thrive approach.

Thrive is intended to be used as a whole-school approach:

“promotes children’s and young people’s positive mental health by helping adults know how to be and what to do in response to their differing and sometimes distressed behaviour. Based on established neuroscience, attachment theory and child development, the Thrive Approach provides training and an online profiling and action-planning tool to equip adults with the knowledge, insights and resources needed to develop the relationships that help children and young people to flourish and learn” (Thrive, 2021).

Existing research papers will be discussed in the literature review to highlight what is already known about the effectiveness of Thrive. This research study used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies which will be explained later in this report.

Literature Review

Thrive was developed by Banks et al in 1994 (Thrive 2015). There have been few research studies regarding the effectiveness of Thrive. Field et al (2019), Bonitto (2019) and London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (2017) all reported that there is a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of Thrive and the impact it has on children's development. Thrive aims to develop childrens' and adolescents' social and emotional wellbeing and to improve their engagement and development. Thrive is a framework based on a developmental model that is used to understand and identify social and emotional wellbeing needs. Thrive has been developed over the last 25 years, drawing upon a wealth of experience and expertise within social work, psychotherapy, and education to help others to support children and young people in need of social and emotional development (Thrive, 2021). Thrive is a whole-school based intervention grounded in Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory.

The available research papers focus on the Thrive approach within various schools using case studies, interviews, and questionnaires. London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (2017) reported on the impact Thrive has on individuals when used as a whole school intervention. Within the paper it was highlighted how the intervention had raised staff awareness regarding children's behaviour within school and made them feel well equipped to manage challenging situations. It allows staff to reconsider the possible causes of a child's behaviour demonstrating how it is outside of the child's control. Reframing staff perceptions of why children display behaviour that challenges is a positive aspect of the nine day Thrive training. Staff felt that they had a better ability to support vulnerable children with their social and emotional needs and that the children became more aware of, and connected with, their support contacts within the school environment. Bonitto (2019) reported that the Thrive approach promotes an increased understanding of Special Educational Needs. However, both studies reported that the cost of implementing Thrive training for all staff was significant.

Field et al (2019) found that staff did not generally feel that there was a whole school commitment to Thrive and stated it was limited and lacked consistency across all pupils. This study explained how the Thrive approach can be most beneficial for

children who are identified as having attachment needs, rather than it being used as a tool to support any child demonstrating Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs (SEMH). There is no evidence provided that the Thrive assessment process can identify those who are most suitable for the intervention.

All three studies reviewed were limited in their methods using small-scale study populations. This gap in the evidence base provides a rationale for undertaking this study at Elm Tree School Community Primary School.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was undertaken in this study, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data allowed some numerical measurement of the perceptions of the study population regarding the Thrive approach that is embedded within the school. Qualitative data enabled the lived experience of the Thrive approach to contribute to the study. This pragmatic design provided the researcher with the best possible way of answering the research question (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

Methods

There were two data collection phases in this study. A questionnaire (copy can be found in Appendix 1) which was distributed to staff who were also invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of staff to check for readability and understanding. This added validity to the research design (Cohen et al, 2017).

Participants

The inclusion criteria for participation were all teachers and teaching assistants who have knowledge and experience of using the Thrive approach. All school staff who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in the project.

Research Governance and Ethical Considerations

This project adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). Informed consent was an essential element of

this study. All participants were provided with an information sheet to allow them to make an informed decision to take part.

All participants that agreed to be involved were made aware of how they could withdraw from the study at any time. When participants completed the anonymous questionnaire, it was implied that consent was given through its completion and submission. Those who took part in the interviews provided written consent. A crucial component of the research was confidentiality. The researcher ensured that any personal identity and all personal information was removed. With the research being undertaken in a school it was also essential that all responses to questions were completely anonymous when relating to pupils or staff. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) processes were followed and aligned with school governance policy on data storage. The researcher used a password protected school laptop. The welfare of all the participants was essential throughout.

Measures

32 questionnaires were distributed within Elm Tree Community Primary School. It consisted of 12 questions (both open and closed). The questionnaire was clear and concise to encourage the participants to engage and to ensure that their interest and cooperation were maintained.

Procedures

An email was sent out with attachments including a participant information sheet, consent form (for the interviews) and questionnaire. Initially there were very limited responses due to distribution being at a busy time of the school year at the end of the summer term. An email was sent to the Head Teacher and Deputy Head to report this limited response rate. A printed copy of the questionnaire was then distributed by the Deputy Head to all team leaders, who cascaded it to all teachers and teaching assistants during a meeting. All 32 completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher for data analysis. Three teachers volunteered to be interviewed.

Data Analysis

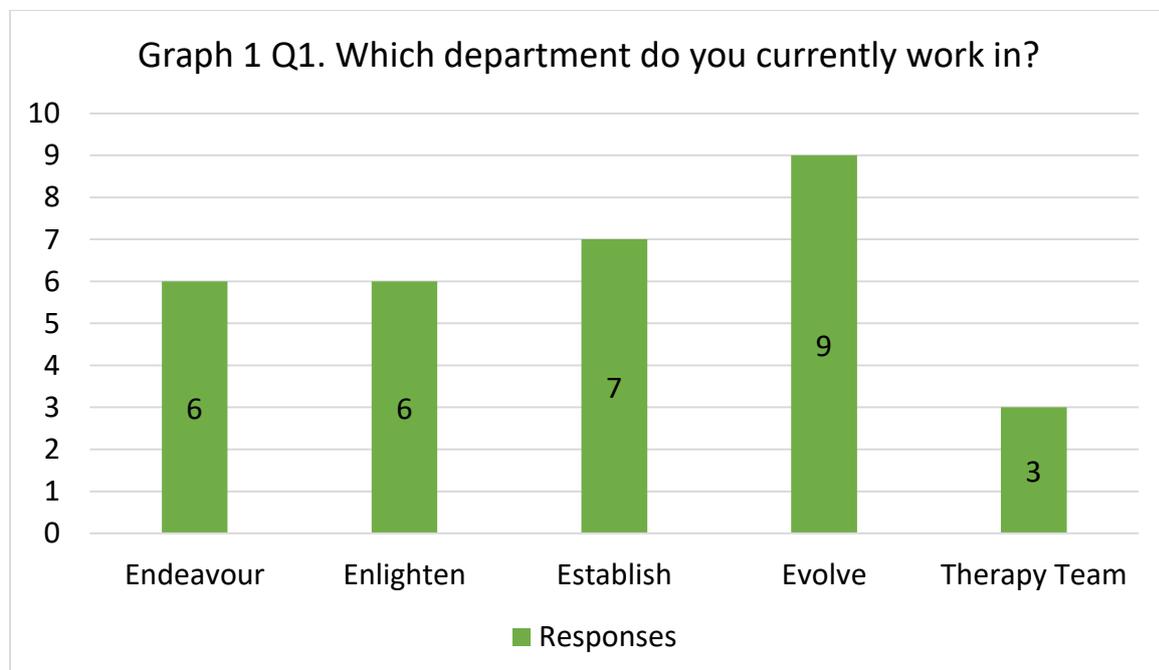
Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the qualitative data (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These networks are web-like illustrations that conclude the main themes within a text.

Results and Findings

The results of the questionnaire findings are outlined below. Illustrative quotes from the three semi-structured interviews are also included.

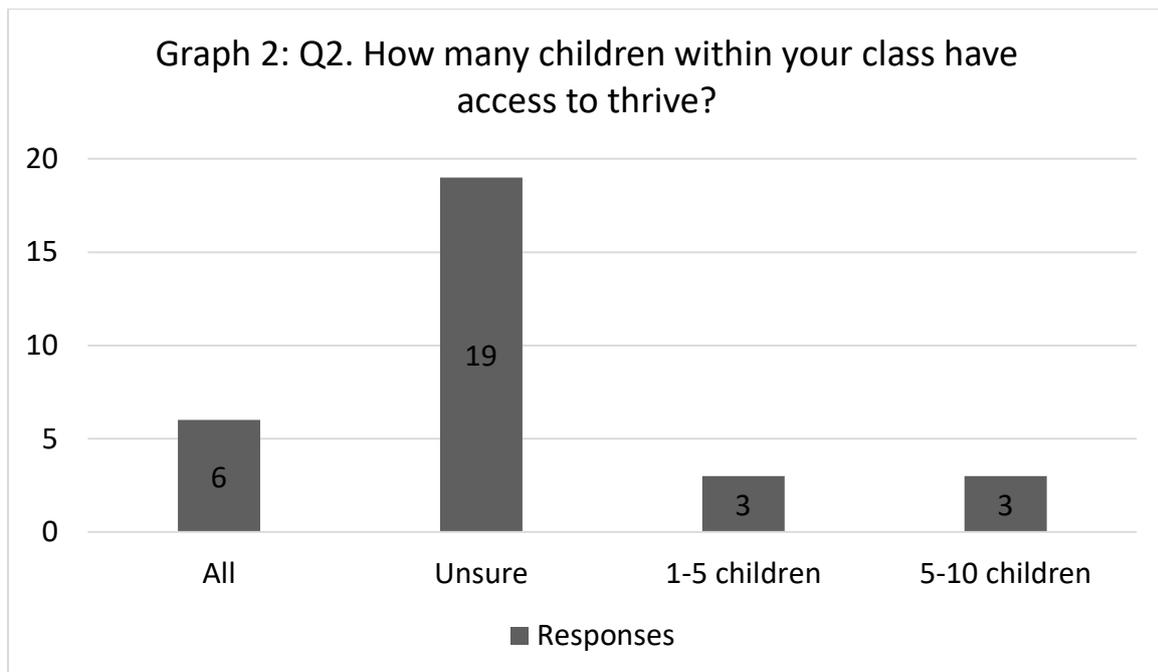
Department representation

Graph 1 below shows a list of the different department pathways available Elm Tree Community Primary School. For example, Early Years is called 'Establish'. Including staff from all pathways as participants in this study provides a good range of experience with different age groups of children.



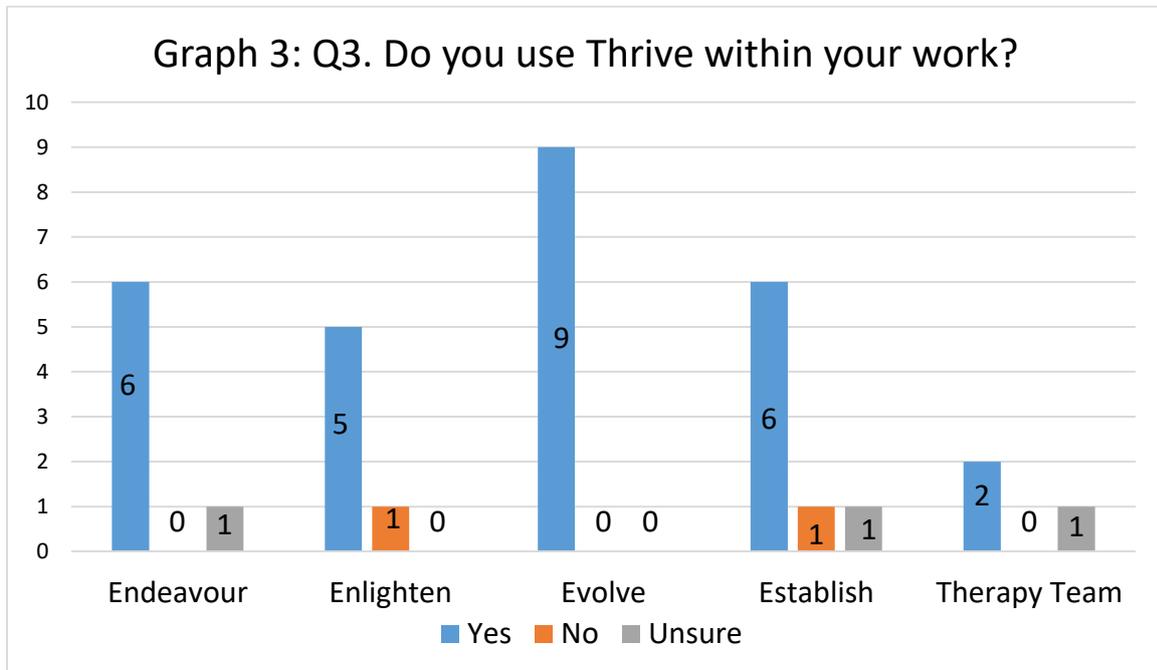
Children with access to Thrive

Graph 2 below shows how many children receive a Thrive intervention within their class. 6 staff members reported all children received Thrive within their class and 19 said they were not sure how many children received it.



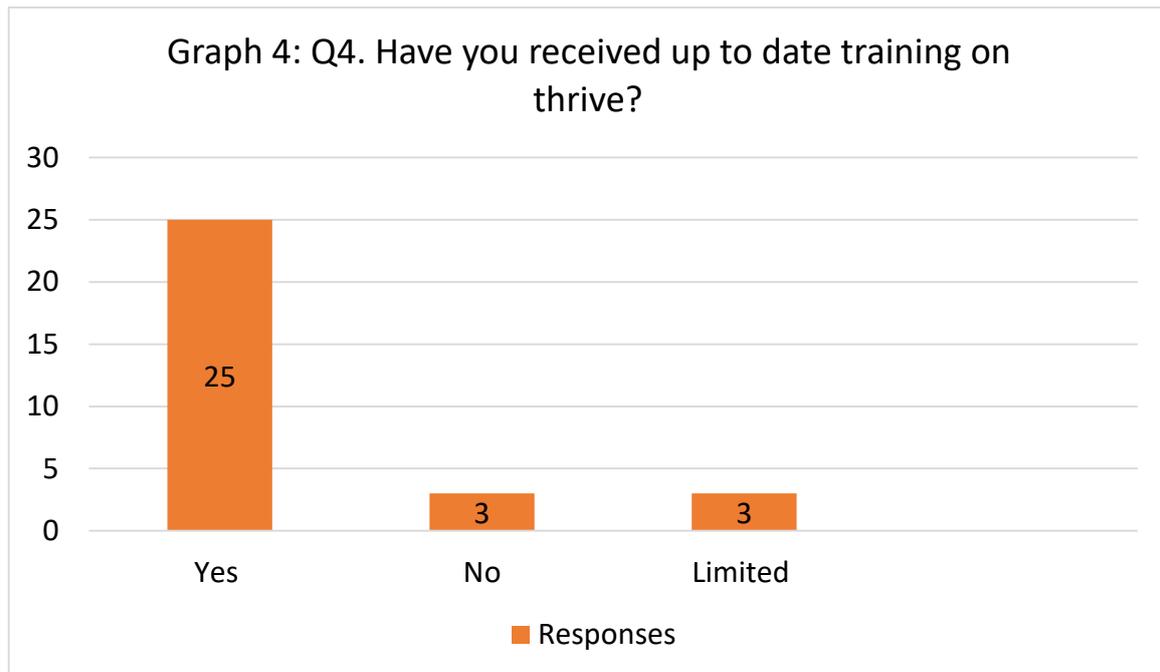
Use of Thrive

Graph 3 below shows how many staff members within each department use the Thrive approach within their work. The vast majority of staff believe they use Thrive in their practice.



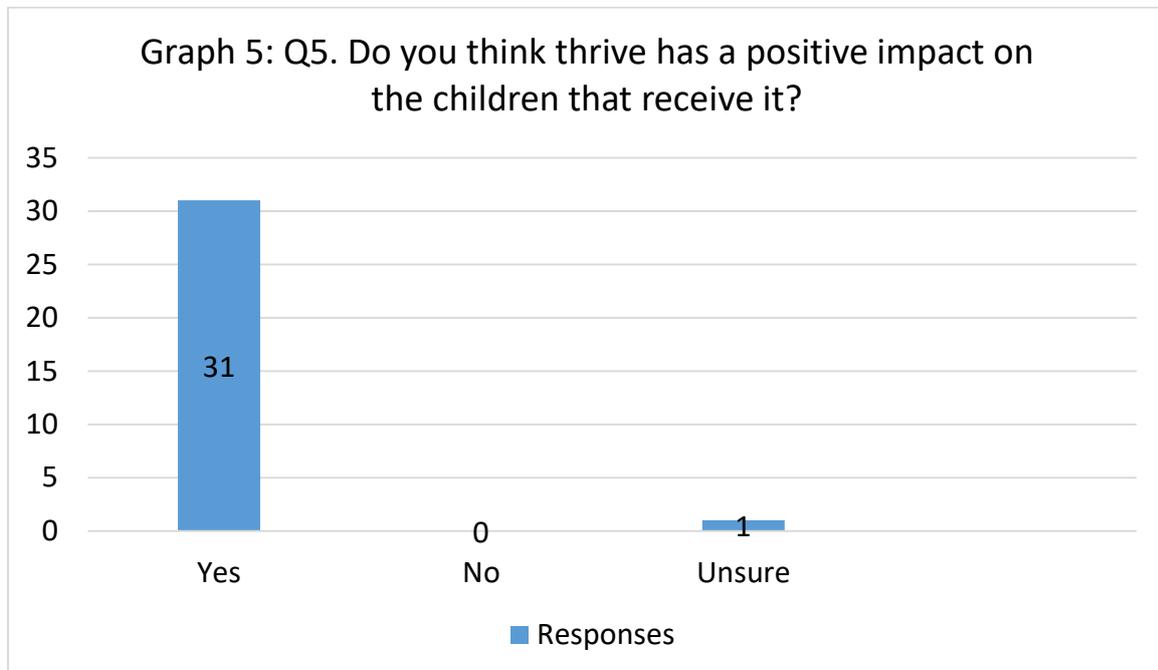
Thrive Training

Graph 4 below shows that 25 (78%) of staff felt they were fully trained and updated on Thrive.



Positive impact of Thrive on the children who receive it

Graph 5 below shows 31 (97%) of participants perceive that Thrive has a positive impact.



All three teachers interviewed explained that those children and young people who had accessed Thrive and receive sessions regularly have made improvements over the year. Here are some illustrative quotes, including concrete examples of impact:

“I got at the start of this year and I know from the SEN that just before lockdown started he was being held three times a day, couldn’t access work, couldn’t work in groups, just really struggled day to day at school and now with the mix of the classroom and Thrive he works in a group hasn’t needed to be held. His wellbeing in school is much better, but he is someone who just does not like school..... He seems to be quite happy to be here rather at the start of the year he just wanted to be at home all the time.. “ (Interviewee 1)

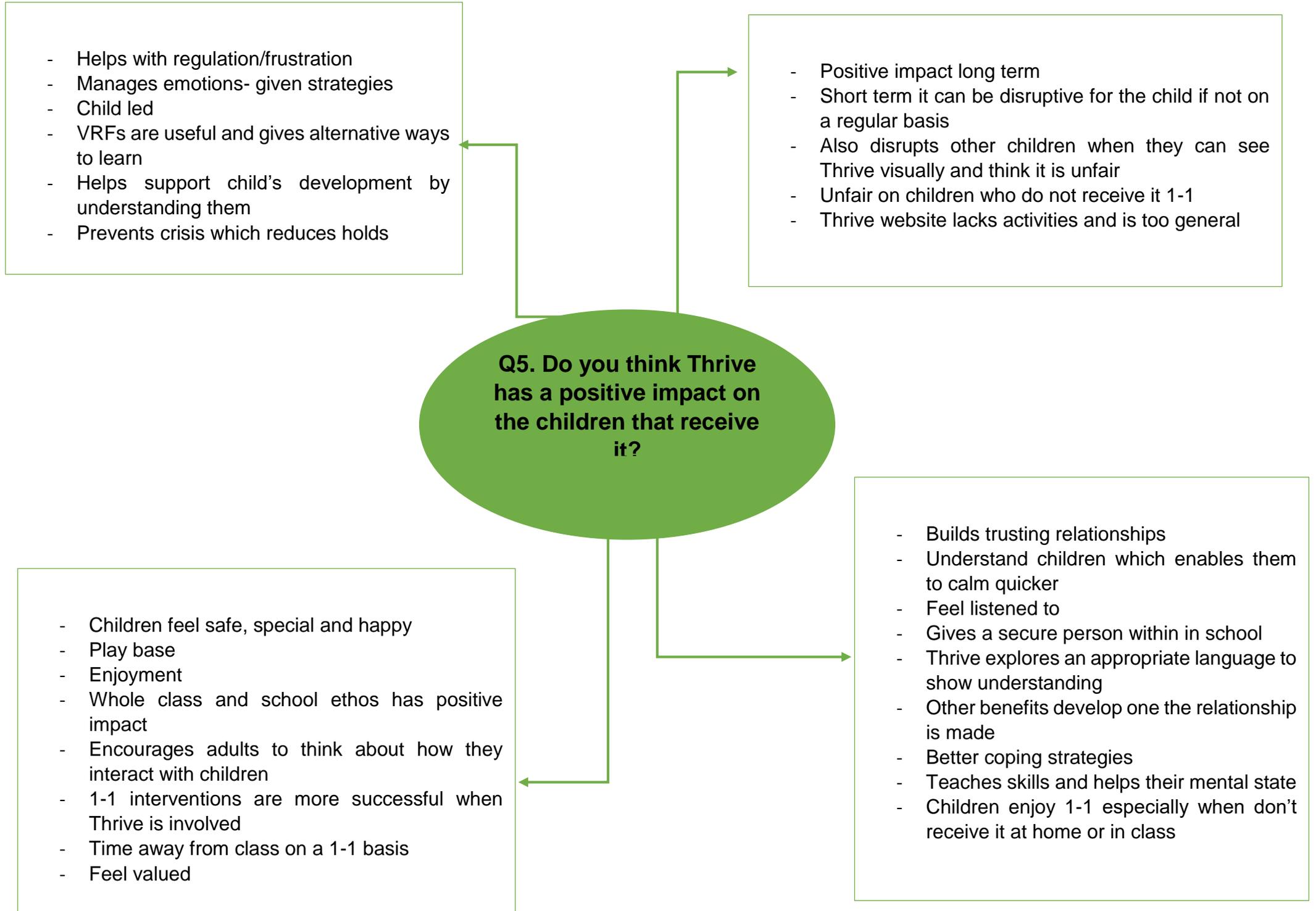
“We have a nurturing environment at Elm Tree anyway but I think Thrive makes a massive impact on the pupils.” (Interviewee 2)

“I think the time we spent with Worked positively as it prepped him for what was going to happen at home.” (Interviewee 3)

“For those who have never worked in a school before, Thrive is such a good base to get an idea on how kids socially, academically, everything, develop. It is helpful for people to understand it and how to deal with it. There is nothing negative about it.” (Interviewee 3)

Figure 1 below shows examples provided by participants in free text comments of how Thrive has had a positive impact.

Figure 1: Staffs' perceptions of when Thrive has a positive impact on pupils



The integration of Thrive into daily classroom routine

Graph 6 shows that all 31 eligible participants agreed that Thrive was part of their daily classroom routine.

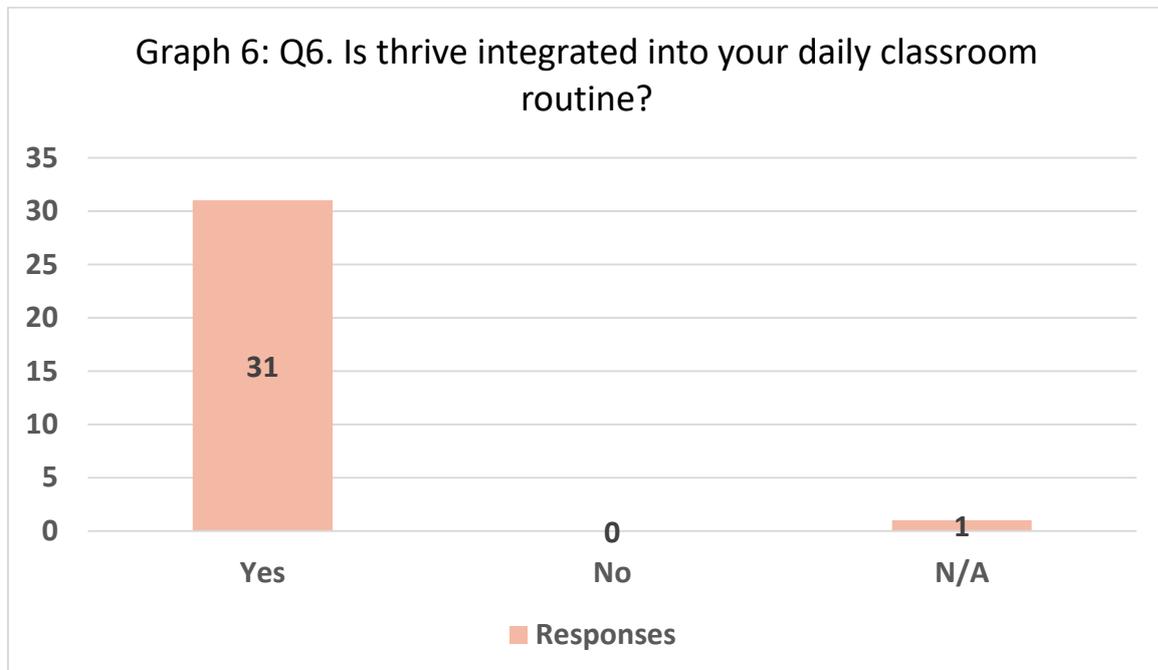


Figure 2 below shows free text examples from respondents on how Thrive is integrated into daily classroom practice. Figure 3 shows specific scenarios provided by staff of when Thrive has impacted positively on children.

Figure 2: Examples of how Thrive is integrated into daily classroom routine and activities

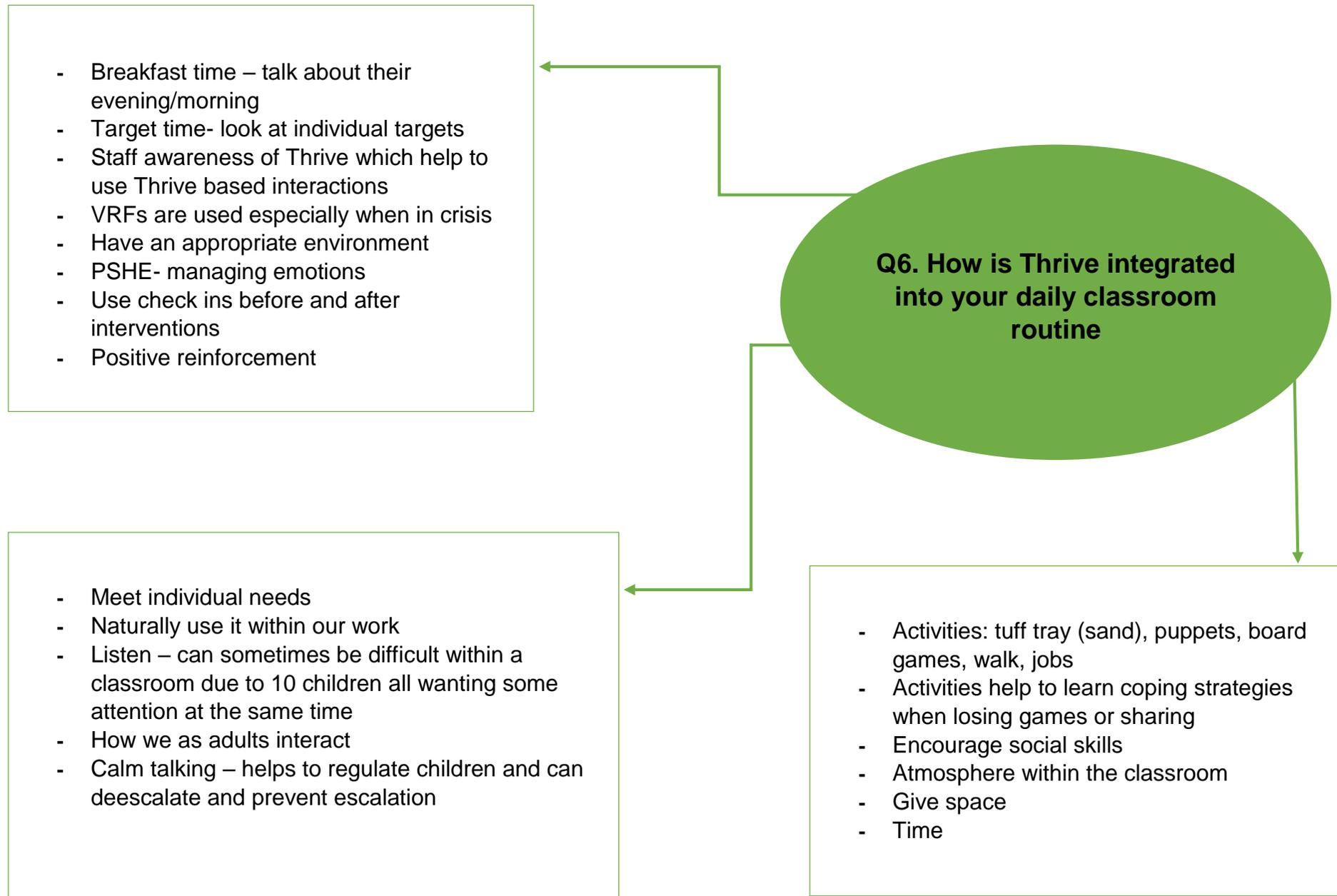
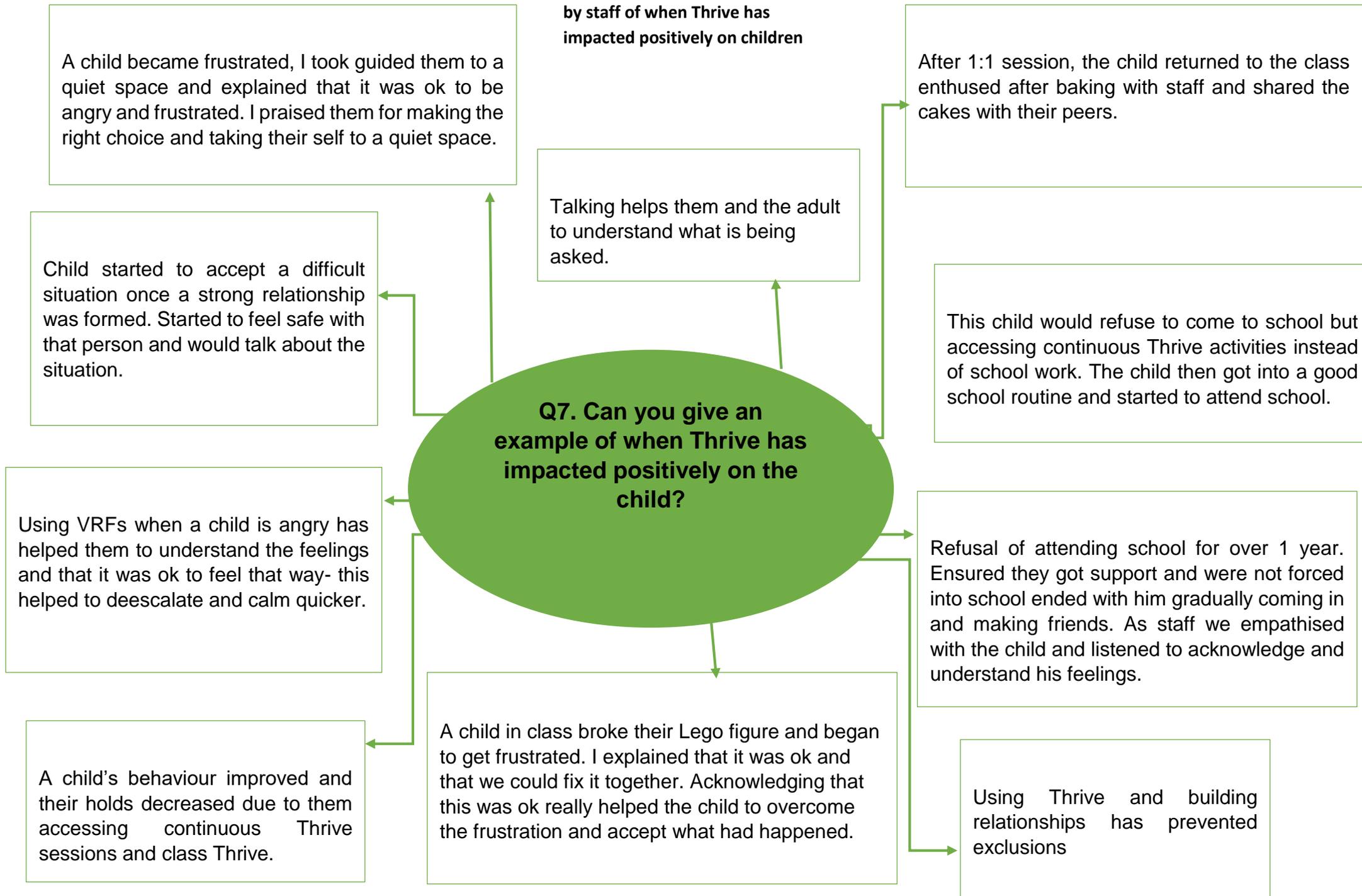


Figure 3: specific scenarios provided by staff of when Thrive has impacted positively on children



When Thrive has had limited impact

Graph 7 shows that 18 (56%) respondents could not recall a time when Thrive had not had a positive impact. Ten (31%) identified occasions when impact was limited.

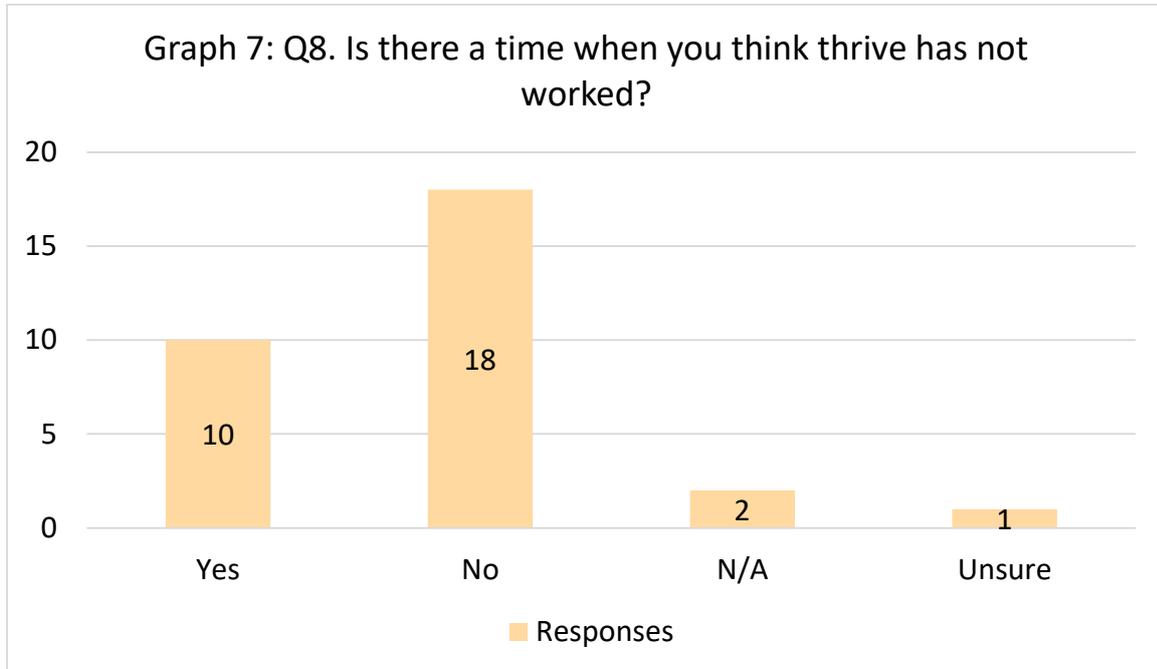
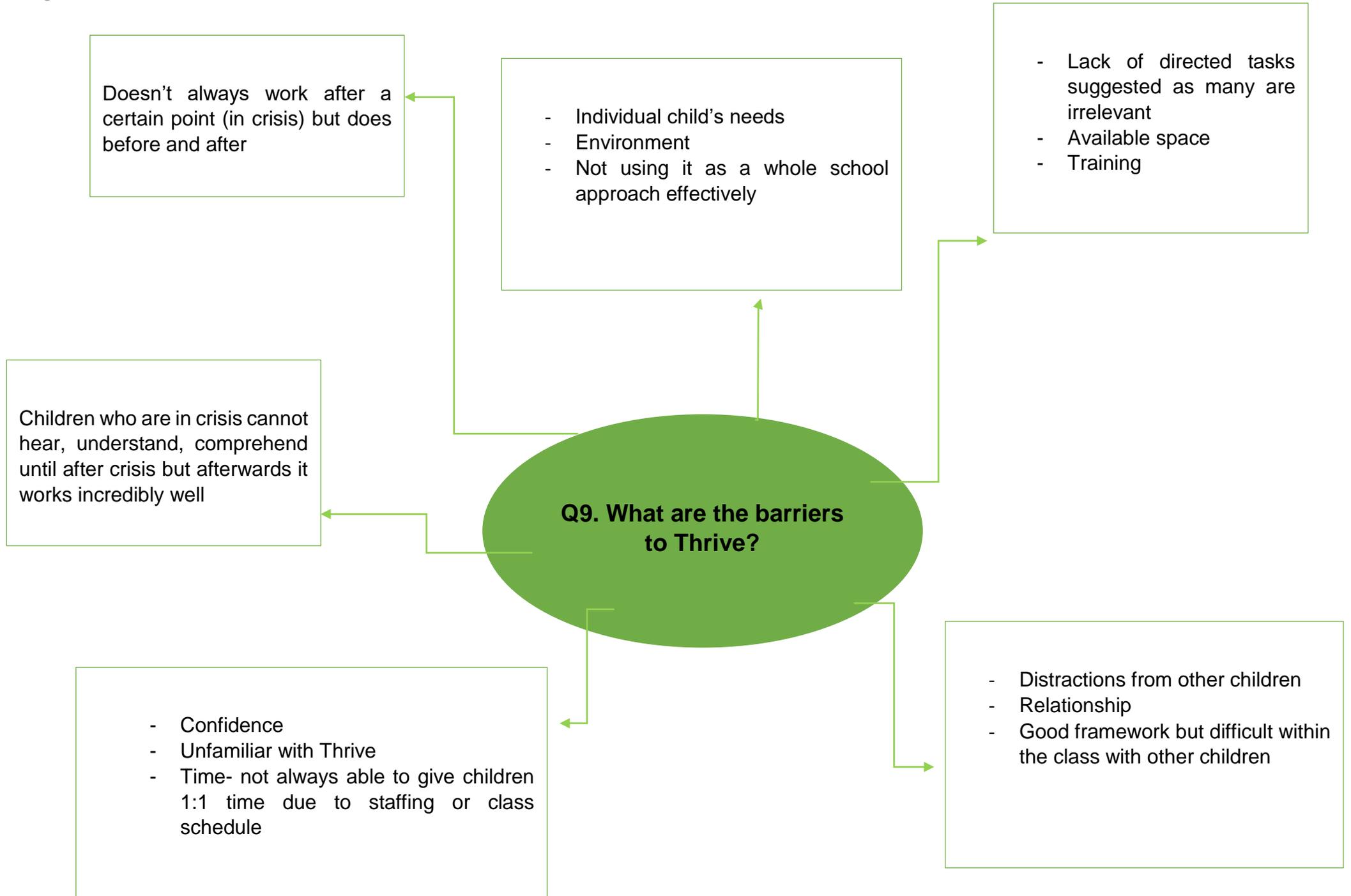


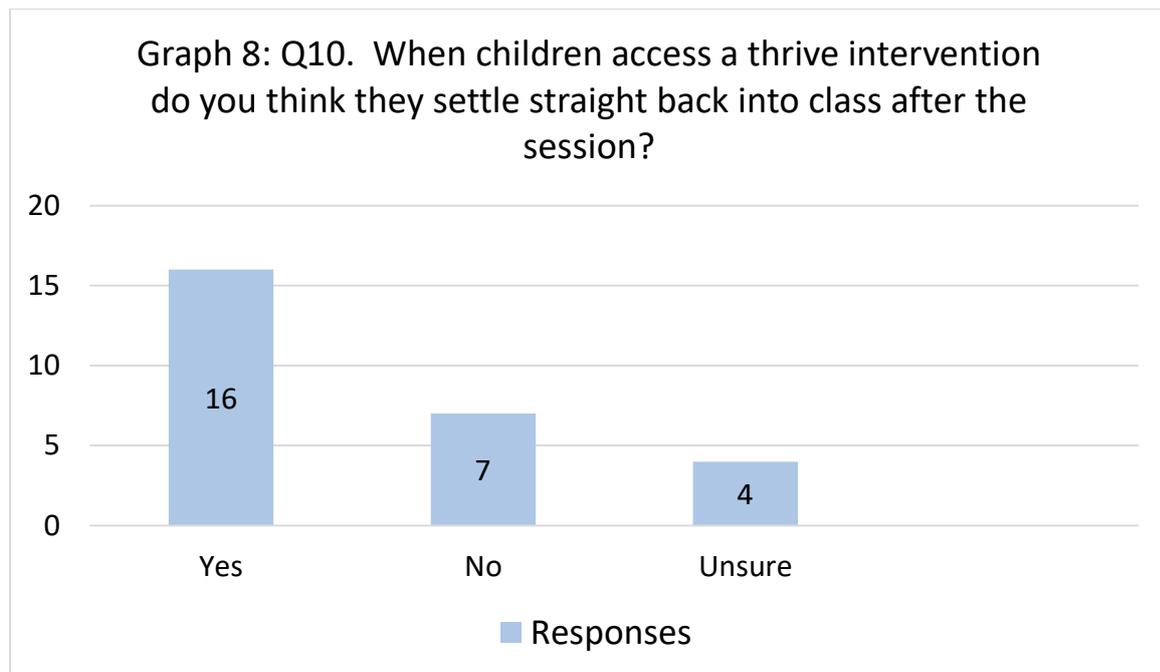
Figure 4 below gives examples of suggested times when Thrive had not worked well.

Figure 4: Barriers to Thrive



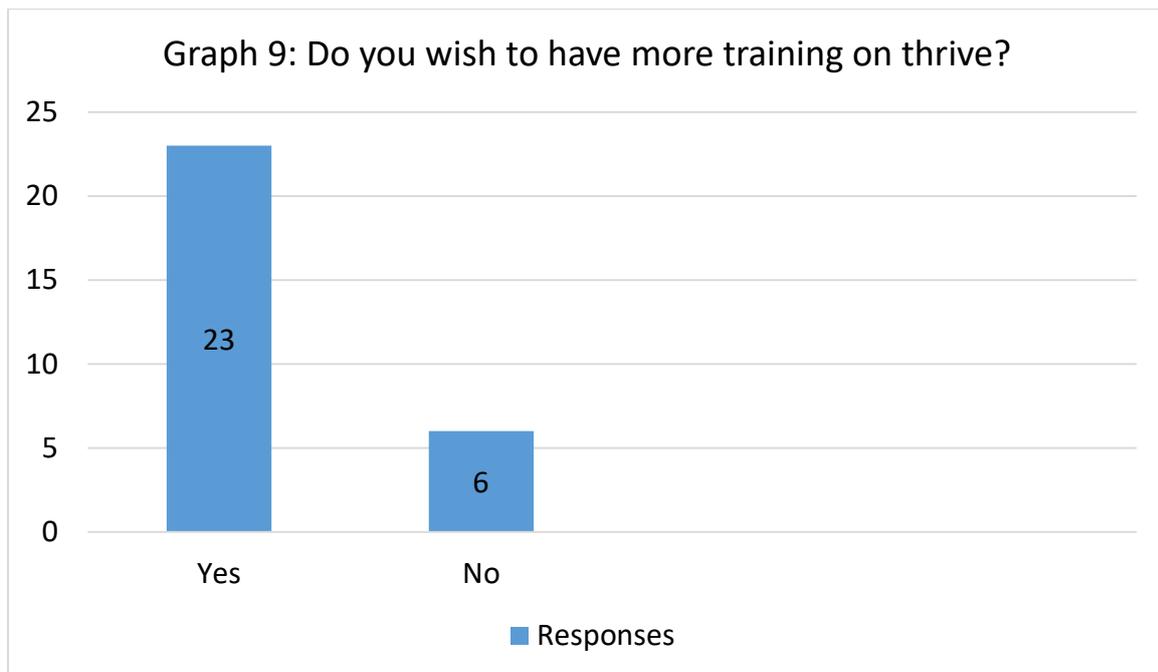
Settling back into class after Thrive sessions

Graph 8 below indicates a variety of opinions regarding children settling back into the classroom following a Thrive intervention. Seven (22%) participants said that children are dysregulated when entering the classroom following Thrive.



Further Thrive Training

As Graph 9 shows below 23 (72%) respondents wanted more Thrive training as they feel it helps with their confidence. Six (19%) participants stated that they had received enough training on Thrive.



Discussion

What works well, the positive impact of the Thrive approach within Elm Tree Community Primary School:

Overall, the Thrive approach is perceived by school staff to be a positive intervention to support the children and young people at Elm Tree Community Primary School. 31 (97%) participants stated that Thrive has a positive impact on pupil's emotional wellbeing. Figure 1 provides examples of this positive impact, with one of the themes being the importance of building and maintaining trusting relationships. This provides pupils with a sense of security within the school environment. This theme concurs with the findings reported by London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (2017) that children became more aware of their support contacts within the school. Participants disclosed how the Thrive approach prevents children and young people from going into crisis and it reduces their frustrations within the school setting. This is achieved by using specific Thrive strategies to help children to manage their emotions, enabling staff to show understanding and to empathise with how the child feels. The feelings that, if not addressed, can easily escalate into a challenging situation.

Figure 3 outlines specific scenarios, provided by staff, when Thrive has impacted positively on children. These provide rich data to support the perceived success of the Thrive approach within Elm Tree School. It is possible that Thrive sessions have prevented school refusal, improved wellbeing and reducing distressed behaviour. The full texts can be found in Figure 3 but the following examples provide a summary:

“This child would refuse to come to school but accessing continuous Thrive activities instead of school work. The child then got into a good school routine and started to attend school”.

“Refusal of attending school for over 1 year. Ensured they got support and were not forced into school ended with him gradually coming in and making friends. As staff we empathised with the child and listened to acknowledge and understand his feelings”.

“A child's behaviour improved and their holds decreased due to them accessing continuous Thrive sessions and class Thrive”.

What are the barriers to successfully embedding the Thrive approach within Elm Tree Community Primary School?

Only 2 (6%) participants describe specific disadvantages of the Thrive approach that is embedded within Elm Tree Community Primary School. Staff report that:

- Some pupils may perceive an unfair and inconsistent system, when they see their peers participating in one to one Thrive sessions. This can cause them to become unsettled and consequently disruptive to other pupils' learning opportunities.
- Thrive is not accessible to all pupils, and it can be perceived as unfair to children who do not meet the criteria to receive Thrive one to one.
- There is deemed to be a lack of practical advice and guidance on the Thrive website. The website is criticised for being too general.

Ten (31%) participants identified specific examples of when the Thrive approach within Elm Tree Community Primary School had not worked effectively. Figure 4 provides examples of the potential barriers staff have perceived when trying to implement the Thrive approach. The environment within the school is not always conducive to successful Thrive sessions. There is not the appropriate space within school, or access to the necessary resources. Participants further clarified that they are not always able to provide one to one support when there are reduced levels of staffing across the school. Thrive is not successful when implemented one to one within the classroom due to other pupils being a distraction and therefore it does not fit appropriately within the classroom schedule. As well as these examples it was also suggested that Thrive is not effectively embedded as a whole school approach as only specific pupils meet the criteria for receiving Thrive as a support for their social, emotional and mental wellbeing. Some children and young people do not access Thrive sessions. This finding was also reported by Field et al (2019) who found limited consistency across pupils.

Despite the inconsistency regarding who accesses individual Thrive sessions there was considerable agreement (31 survey participants, 97%) that the approach and principles of Thrive are integrated into pupil's daily routines. Figure 2 highlights examples of how teachers and teaching assistant staff integrate Thrive into the class timetable. These included: Breakfast time, target time, interactions throughout the day,

activities to learn coping strategies, losing and sharing. Thrive interactions are also used when deescalating a child in crisis.

However, qualitative data contradicted this consensus, and it was highlighted in 2 interviews that it is perceived as almost impossible to integrate specific Thrive activities into the general classroom routine. One participant explained that *“I can sometimes do group work but it is so difficult to give children 1:1 Thrive”*. Another said, *“It isn’t possible to integrate Thrive into the daily routine due to time and not having the staff available”*. The same participant explained how some children started off with Thrive however due to staffing this was abandoned at the most crucial time for that child; Thrive was not available to them when it was needed the most. Early Years staff expressed a different and more positive experience regarding integrating Thrive within their daily routine. Early Years emphasised how Thrive is part of their continuous provision and an activity is embedded into the daily routine. Although the data may seem contradictory it is possible to conclude that that the theoretical principles of the Thrive approach are more easily integrated into the whole school curriculum but that facilitating one to one specific intervention sessions is more problematic.

Additional considerations regarding the implementation of the Thrive approach within Elm Tree Community Primary School:

All 3 interviewees (100%) suggested that Teaching Assistants should be trained in the Thrive approach to the same standard as the teachers so that they can provide one to one intervention, especially when Thrive practitioners are not available. *“TA’s spend a lot of time with the children and could easily do Thrive within the school day”*.

This research study was conducted in unprecedented circumstances. During data collection the world was experiencing a pandemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19). This has had significant implications for the Education System within the UK. One interview (33%) participant explained that during COVID-19 Thrive interventions had been initiated and then withdrawn due to the government restrictions put in place within the school. This had a negative impact on some children as improvements that they had gained regressed and progress that could have been made over the year did not happen. This meant that, at a crucial time for child mental health, some children who needed it the most were unable to receive it.

Recommendations

It can be concluded that within Elm Tree Community Primary School the Thrive approach is perceived to be a very effective intervention, providing it is used appropriately and consistently. The environment needs to be suitable to have enough space to conduct one to one sessions and there must be readily accessible resources and adequate staffing.

These conclusions can inform the following recommendations to ensure that Elm Tree Community Primary School are optimising the potential of the Thrive approach. These recommendations are grounded in the data and drawn from teacher and teaching assistant perspectives:

- There needs to be more staff trained to carry out one to one Thrive sessions. This will enable more children to access the intervention, improving consistency and inclusion.
- There needs to be allocated, private and confidential spaces available for one-to-one intervention sessions to take place. This reduces distraction for other pupils and increases focus for those accessing the intervention.
- These 'safe' spaces need to be booked in advance so that there is appropriate access to a timetable of room allocation including a kitchen and outdoor space when necessary. This will ensure confidentiality, promote security, and improve consistency.
- There needs to be more 'Thrive specific' resources made available for staff to use. These should be accessible to all staff to be used when sessions are scheduled.
- If it is not possible for all pupils to access Thrive then it is of paramount importance that all staff make use of the general principles of Thrive and integrate these into the whole school curriculum, including non-academic activities, for example, unstructured free time, target time and embedded within the classroom routine. Using and developing resources and activities from Thrive online.

Limitations

This study has limitations:

- Data is collected from only one school setting. This means that conclusions are about the implementation of Thrive within Elm Tree Community Primary School as opposed to an evaluation of the Thrive approach. However, the methodology is transferable. Similar research conducted in other schools that use Thrive could strengthen the findings.
- The original proposal for this research suggested interviews as the most effective method of data collection, however recruitment was challenging and only three interviews were conducted. More interview data would provide more detailed qualitative analysis.
- The world pandemic impacted on how Thrive had been integrated in the months prior to data collection. This may have affected the results. Had the data been collated at any other time the findings may have been different.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

We are interested in the effectiveness of Thrive within Elm Tree Community Primary School.

All survey data will be confidential and only myself will see your response. No individuals will be named or identifiable in any reports. By completing the survey, you are consenting to take part in the research study.

1. Which department do you currently work in?

.....

2. How many children within your class have access to thrive? Please leave blank if you are unsure.

.....

3. Do you use thrive within your work?

Yes

No

Unsure

4. Have you received up to date training on thrive?

Yes

No

5. Do you think thrive has a positive impact on the children that receive it?

Yes

No

Please explain your answer.

6. Is thrive integrated into your daily classroom routine?

Yes

No

If yes, please explain how.

7. Can you give an example of when thrive has impacted positively on the child?

8. Is there a time when you think thrive has not worked well?

Yes

No

If yes, please can you explain your answer.

9. What are the barriers to thrive? If none, please leave blank.

10. When children access a thrive intervention do you think they settle straight back into class after the session?

Yes

No

11. Do you wish to have more training on thrive?

Yes

No

12. Any further comments to make about thrive please do so.

Thank you for participating in this survey.