

Chapter 1

Creating a tribal classroom

Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.

– Helen Keller

Chapter overview

In this chapter, we explore the work of psychology professor, Louis Cozolino, who created the concept of the ‘tribal classroom’. When we tap into our pupils’ primitive social instincts, he argues, it can have powerful effects on their wellbeing and ability to learn.

In theory

- Understand our tribal roots
- The tribal classroom
- The social brain
- Attachment-based teaching
- Positive relationships

In action

- Design a team flag
- Greetings and endings
- Teaching social skills
- Humour and games
- Residential and outdoor trips

In theory

Understand our tribal roots

Before we look at what tribal classrooms are, we need to understand more about our tribal history. According to Louis Cozolino, as a species, human beings really haven’t had enough time to evolve and move away from our tribal past (Cozolino, 2013). For the majority of the last 100,000 years, it is thought that modern humans lived in

hunter-gatherer tribes of between 50 and 75 individuals. These small communities would forage for food and resources and they were held together by family relationships, rituals and the need to cooperate in order to survive (Richerson and Boyd, 1998). Tribal groups were small, based on the values of cooperation, equality, fairness and cohesiveness, decision-making was democratic and there were shared responsibilities. More recently, in the last 5,000 years, Western culture has moved from tribal- to agricultural- to industrial-based societies. It may seem that 5,000 years is a very long period of time but in terms of biological evolution it is a nanosecond.

In our modern industrialised societies, we tend to live in larger groups (in towns and cities), our society is based more on values like individualism and competition, and there tends to be more of a hierarchy and imposed rules. Cozolino believes that our modern cultures often clash with, and are mismatched to, our basic social instincts and even our neurobiology and that this causes us stress, anxiety and unhappiness.

At our core, we are a tribal species and we function best and are happiest when we live and work in tribes. By creating tribal classrooms, we are able to fulfil some of our pupils' core physical and emotional needs. Therefore, Cozolino states that, 'Teachers who are able to tap into the primitive social instincts of their students through attachment relationships and build tribal classrooms succeed in seemingly impossible educational situations.' (Cozolino, 2013, p. xxiv) Children's brains literally get turned on when they feel part of a tribal classroom.

The tribal classroom

But what exactly is a tribal classroom? Well, Cozolino believes a tribal classroom would embody tribal qualities such as democratic leadership, cooperation, teamwork, equality, fairness, trust and strong personal relationships. In a tribe, everyone feels valued and has a role to play. A tribe is essentially a big family and if we can create this atmosphere in our classrooms, children can really begin to flourish. Cozolino explains that, 'Tribal teachers become loving and protective parents to their pupils, who in turn become caring and supportive siblings to one another.' (Cozolino, 2013, p. 245) This familial environment would be full of positive relationships that foster secure attachments between teacher and

pupil, which in turn promote the release of the bonding hormone and neurotransmitter, oxytocin (more on this later, p. 16). Therefore, teachers are central to establishing a tribal classroom environment. You would be like a tribal elder – wise, experienced, brave and fair. Your job is to help your children feel like they belong. Research shows that a sense of belonging at school is fundamental to learning (Ryan and Powelson, 1991). And when children feel that they belong, then they will feel safe to explore and take risks.

Many of the pupils we teach have incredibly stressful home lives, so tribal classrooms purposefully create a calm, safe environment. Ridicule and shame have no place in a tribal classroom but humour and light-heartedness do. Teachers who can incorporate appropriate humour into their teaching practice can counteract the inevitable stress and tension of our education system. Tribal classrooms also include a lot of play. Research has shown that exploration and play are a core part of our natural learning and are essential to neuroplasticity (the ability of our brain to grow and change). Play activates the release of other ‘happy hormones’, such as dopamine, serotonin and endorphins, which boost feelings of wellbeing, aid learning and foster social connectivity (Cozolino, 2013, pp. 171–2).

Finally, stories and storytelling are a core feature of tribal classrooms. Storytelling is woven into the fabric of our nature and has a deep evolutionary history. The role of storytelling in tribes was for memory storage, emotional regulation and social cohesion (Cozolino, 2013, p. 187). Clearly, storytelling has as much relevance for children today as it did for our ancestors. Stories enrich children’s emotional vocabulary and allow them to learn from a character’s moral dilemmas. In the writing and telling of their own stories, children also get to express themselves and better understand the world around them.

The social brain

It is a widely held view among psychologists and neuroscientists that humans possess a social brain. What this means is that our brains are shaped and sculpted significantly by our nurture and social relationships. In fact, there are certain parts of the brain, like the amygdala (see Chapter 2, p. 31 and Chapter 3, p. 46), that have neurons in them that will only fire in response to other people’s reactions (Ratey, 2003,

pp. 295–6). Additionally, the discovery of mirror neurons by neurophysiologist, Giacomo Rizzolatti, also supports the idea of the social brain. Mirror neurons fire when we carry out an action, or witness someone else carry out an action and they might move us to imitate what we observe. Mirror neurons are also thought to be partly responsible for our ability to empathise with other people and feel what they are feeling. For example, when someone else laughs at a joke, even if we haven't heard the joke, we feel the urge to laugh too. Or if someone bangs their head, we might grab *our* heads and go 'Ouch!'. It is clear that our brains change in response to other people and our interactions with them.

Looking further into our evolutionary past, we begin to see why. As primates began to live in increasingly larger social groups, their brains started to get larger and more complex. These larger social groups were able to provide more dedicated childcare, stimulation and challenge to the brain, which supported its growth further (Dunbar, 1992). This laid the foundations for the development of our language, problem-solving skills and complex thinking abilities. The brains humans have today have been grown and moulded over hundreds of thousands of years by the social groups and tribes they were raised in.

The implication of all of this is that *how* we look after the children in our care will have a far bigger impact on their development than anything we explicitly teach them. Psychology professor, Alison Gopnik, goes as far as saying, 'Children actually learn more from the unconscious details of what caregivers do than from any of the conscious manipulations' (Gopnik, 2016, p. 90). In starting to design your tribal classroom, it is important to bear in mind that we need to give the children in our care something good to imitate and that the atmosphere in your tribe is crucial for their brain development and wellbeing. As tribal leaders, teachers can have a significant impact on their tribe's lives.

Attachment-based teaching

Psychologists call love 'attachment', I guess because it sounds less problematic than 'love' and is maybe easier to measure. Either way, attachment psychologists study how young children feel about their caregivers (normally mothers in these experiments) and one way they do this is by separating one-year-olds from their caregivers, whilst leaving them in a

room with a stranger, and then reuniting them. Generally, the children will fall into one of the following four categories of attachment:

1. securely attached
2. avoidantly attached
3. anxiously attached
4. disorganised attached.

The 'secure' children will show distress when their caregiver leaves and joy when they return. The 'avoidant' children look away when their caregiver leaves and appear ambivalent even when they return. 'Anxious' children get very distressed when separated and then continue to be inconsolable when reunited. 'Disorganised' children will often display strange behaviour like spinning around in circles or collapsing to the ground. These children often have parents who display frightened or frightening behaviour to their children and, as a result, the inner turmoil in the child causes their coping skills and even motor skills to become disorganised. Also, the worrying thing noted by psychologists about 'avoidant' children, who on the surface seem fine and not really bothered when left alone, is that when their heart rates are monitored they are actually very upset but have learned to hide their true feelings.

Attachment styles are important because they affect children's well-being, their ability to learn and their behaviour. They tend to follow us into adulthood too and shape our future relationships. The behaviour of insecurely attached children can often be the expression of anxiety and fear. So, what looks like disobedience and 'bad' behaviour on the surface may actually be their way of coping with difficult feelings and an inability to regulate their emotions (Cozolino, 2013, p. 57). Our classrooms will be full of an array of children (and teachers) with varying attachment styles, but the good news is that tribal teachers and classrooms can create a secure base for all children so they feel supported and safe. Cozolino says that, 'Children learn best when they feel protected and connected. The goal of attachment-based teaching is to have each child move from feeling vulnerable, frightened and unimportant to feeling protected, cared for and valued – a state...that optimises learning.' (Cozolino, 2013, p. 241) Tribal classrooms are essential for promoting secure attachments

among its pupils because they foster strong, positive relationships where children feel safe and cared for.

Positive relationships

Ultimately, creating a tribal classroom is about establishing and investing in positive relationships between the teaching adults and the children, and between the children themselves. These are relationships based on trust, honesty, support, kindness, love, friendship and teamwork. Positive relationships have been a core part of our survival as a species and the backbone of tribes. Writing in the late 19th century about human evolution, Charles Darwin stated that, 'Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring' (Darwin, 1871). To foster positive relationships, we need to be mindful about how much criticism we give children in relation to the amount of praise we give them. Studies by relationship expert John Gottman show that successful relationships have an average ratio of 5:1 in terms of positive to negative interactions (Gottman, 1994). The Institute of Child Education and Psychology (ICEP) notes that, for children, this ratio should probably be even higher for them to flourish and we should aim for about seven or eight positive interactions for every negative one (ICEP, Module 2, p. 13).

Not only do positive relationships aid survival in our species, but they also positively impact our health and even help us to live longer. Studies show that just being around supportive others can have a huge impact on our health and can reduce blood pressure, stress hormones and the risk of getting ill (Cozolino, 2013, p. 112). Positive relationships also promote the release of the 'happy hormone' oxytocin in our brains. Oxytocin is often called the 'love' or 'tend and befriend' hormone and is fundamental in creating secure attachments between children and their caregivers. Mothers' bodies are flooded with oxytocin when they give birth as it helps them bond with their newborn babies, and is necessary for the production of breast milk. It promotes feelings of trust and empathy, and has been shown to reduce levels of anxiety. People who are administered oxytocin seem to be more trusting and it makes them more willing to share and cooperate (Gopnik, 2016, p. 70). There is no doubt



that positive relationships would have been key in the development of our social brain and in the survival of our tribal ancestors, and they are crucial for tribal classrooms today.

In action

I am certain that many great teachers naturally create tribal classrooms without even realising that this is what they are doing. It is instinctive for these teachers to create tribal classrooms for the very reason that it is woven into our DNA. It just feels right and natural to create a sense of family in your classroom. Taking Cozolino's messages on board, here are a few ways that you can create a tribal classroom in your school.

Design a team flag

Developing a sense of team in your class can be a great way to bring out children's tribal instincts. Here's how you could do this by creating a team flag:

- At the beginning of a school year, get your new class to think about what makes a good team (this is your version of a tribe). Discuss some ideas and then show a video montage of one of the most successful teams around – Team GB. The great thing about Team GB is that it is full of inspiring role models from both genders and is culturally diverse.
- After watching a highly emotive Team GB montage (there are quite a few on www.youtube.com but this is my favourite: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKJDjg4ebNQ), brainstorm the qualities and values that a good team needs. Typically, the children come up with ideas like 'teamwork', 'friendship', 'kindness', 'effort', 'love', 'trust', 'honesty', 'perseverance' and 'resilience'.
- Scribe these on the board as the children call them out. Then tell your class that, like Team GB, they are a team. 'We are now Team XXXX,' I normally proclaim proudly. (Team Year 4 Green, Team Year 2, Team Picasso, Team Monet are some of my previous teams).



Tales from the classroom

It was early August and I already had ‘the fear’ about the new class I was inheriting in September. Year 2 had been a handful for their previous two teachers. So much so that their Reception and Year 1 teachers had both had time off for stress when they had been teaching them. I can remember my first week with Year 2 – I was constantly barking instructions and dishing out sanctions. My positive behaviour management had gone out of the window! They just weren’t gelling as a class. There was no cohesion, no sense of cooperation. At every opportunity, they would tell on each other and try to get one another into trouble. Fortunately, it was September 2012 and we had just seen the dazzling display of brilliance and teamwork from Team GB at the London 2012 Olympics. Year 2 were the first class I made a team flag with. We discussed at length what qualities Team GB showed at the Olympics, and we designed our class flag around the values we wanted to display in our team. In an instant, we had become *Team Year 2* and we worked hard that year to work better as a team. It certainly wasn’t easy, and there were many times where I thought that we’d never make a good team. But, bit by bit, little by little, arguments started to get resolved more quickly. The tale-telling started to wane. The children were more likely to share and take turns. They started being kinder to each other and supporting one another. By the end of that year, and it was one of the longest years of my teaching career (an Ofsted inspection fell slap bang in the middle of it!), I was completely besotted with Team Year 2. I was lucky enough to get them back when I moved into Year 4. We continued to work on our teamwork and we had become a proper little tribal family by the end of Year 4 – arguably a somewhat dysfunctional family, but a family nonetheless. I left the school that year but two years later returned just to attend that class’s leavers’ assembly in Year 6. It’s amazing what a class flag and a bit of teamwork can do.

Greetings and endings

If we're trying to establish a sense of family in our tribal classrooms, I feel it is really important that all of your pupils experience a warm and positive greeting in the morning and a fond farewell at the end of the day. Why not try these ideas when greeting your class in the morning?

- Greet your pupils at the door of the classroom with a smile and by saying their name. Not only are smiles contagious, so it is an easy way to spread some positivity throughout your tribe at the start of the day, but it signals to the children that they are safe and that you can be trusted. Using their first name is a powerful way of connecting with individual tribe members and signals to them that they have been noticed and that they matter.
- You can mix your greetings up with a handshake, a 'high-five' or a 'fist-bump' as the power of touch can be really important (you work in a primary school so you're allowed to have fun with your tribe!). Remember the happy hormone, oxytocin? Well, it can be released when people touch hands together, so greeting your pupils this way can release the hormone that helps them feel calm, secure and connected. A positive greeting in the morning sets the tone for the rest of the day.

Endings are crucial too, especially when the day has been difficult for some of your tribe. If people's days end on a negative, even if it was largely positive overall, they will generally rate it and remember it as a bad day. Conversely, 'peak-end' theory demonstrates that if endings are positive, people will rate the overall experience as positive even if, on average, the experience was poor (Kahneman et al., 1993). So try to end your day positively by experimenting with these ideas:

- End your day reading a chapter or two from a great story. Nothing conjures up an image of a tribe more than being gathered round a camp fire listening to tales of the past, so always bring your class together for a story. It's great when a chapter ends with a cliffhanger, as your tribe will be desperate to find out what happens next and will look forward to story time again with anticipation!
- You could play live music videos or a funny Michael Rosen performance poem to end the day – just to get their positive emotions pumping and to end the day on a high.

- If one of your tribe has not had such a great day in terms of their behaviour, it is really important to remind them of the team flag and the values they are expected to uphold but also that tomorrow is a new day and a fresh start. Putting your arm around their shoulder and reminding them of the positive choices they had made in the day reinforces that you care about them, that their day was not entirely bad, and that you have high expectations of them that you know they can rise to. This allows you to maintain boundaries but you're doing it in a positive way.

Teaching social skills

There will be children in your tribe who regularly make poor choices and who find it difficult to fit in. The most important thing for these children is not to give up on them. Yes, they will take up most of your time. Yes, they will push your buttons. And yes, they will keep making the same mistakes despite pep talks, encouragement and constant reminders about making the right choices. But, as the saying goes, 'the children who need the most love, will ask for it in the most unloving ways.' Often, these children simply have not had the nurture, upbringing or positive role models in their lives to help them develop the social skills to thrive in a tribal classroom. Helping these children find their way and feel part of the tribe will be far more important and useful for their lives than teaching them how to use subordinate clauses. In such circumstances, it has been shown to be beneficial to directly teach social skills to children (Ratey, 2003, p. 299), and you could try these ideas:

- Set aside time each week for your class to play card and board games. All children will learn and practise the skills of taking turns, sharing, listening and responding, as well as how to win and lose graciously. Games are also great for developing cognitive skills, as children have to learn the rules and then develop strategies to win.
- Use drama and role-play to act out different social situations. It could be practising how to politely ask others to join a game in the playground, or how to deal with another child who is being mean to you. When children are put in role-play social situations and then rehearse their different responses, their brains are learning how to handle those situations in the future.

- When reading your class story at the end of the day, be sure to discuss any social situations that characters find themselves in, where they may be experiencing a problem or dilemma. Get your children to put themselves in the characters' shoes and ask, 'What would you do in that situation?' Getting children to see others' perspectives is a key part of developing empathy, a crucial social skill.

Humour and games

Successful tribal classrooms definitely incorporate fun and laughter in an appropriate way into the school day. I think it is important that teachers don't take themselves too seriously and find opportunities to laugh with the children and at themselves. I'm certainly not proposing that you become the class clown and just try to make wisecracks all day, but having a sense of humour shows that you are human, and by sharing laughter with your tribe, you can bring everyone together in an inclusive way. Here are three simple games to play with your class:

- **Call my bluff:** This is one of the best getting-to-know-you games to try at the start of the year. Each child and adult in the classroom writes down two lies about themselves and one truth. The lies shouldn't be too obvious like, 'I once flew to the moon wearing a Donald Trump onesie.' Everyone takes a turn to read out their three personal 'facts' and the teacher has to guess which one is the lie. If the teacher gets it wrong, one point to the class but if they get it correct, one point to the teacher. The children then get to guess their teacher's lie. This game can be really funny and is a great way of finding out more about your tribe. You also get to know who the really good liars are, which can be insightful! You can play this game at various points in the year when it should be harder to hoodwink your tribe as they get to know you even more.
- **Pass the hug:** When teaching a tribe of six-year-olds, I created a game called 'pass the hug'. The children sat in a circle with their eyes closed. I would touch someone on their shoulder and they had to pass a hug to the person next to them. The hug would get passed round until it reached the start person again who then called out 'Stop!'. The children then had to guess who had passed the first hug. Now it's not the most challenging game, but I invented it because

I knew that hugging releases oxytocin, and that the children found it hilarious to hug one another. Seeing the children beaming with smiles anticipating the hug, and then giggling away when someone hugged them was great. The children often asked to play this game. Usually at the start of a maths lesson! It's a nice game to play near the end of a busy week.

- **Bounce buzz:** Another popular game I play with the children is my version of the maths game 'Fizz Buzz'. In 'Bounce buzz', the children stand in a circle and someone starts with a large, soft bouncy ball. As the ball gets passed round the circle, each child says a number in sequence starting from 'one'. When they get to a multiple of five they don't say the number, instead they bounce the ball and say 'bounce', and pass the ball to the next person who carries on with the counting. When they get to a multiple of ten they don't say the number, instead they bounce the ball twice saying, 'bounce buzz'. If you make a mistake (e.g. by not bouncing the ball, or by saying the number instead of 'bounce' or 'bounce buzz') you sit down and are out of this round.

As the children get good at playing this version, start to make the game harder. You can move to passing the ball randomly around the circle (if it's a poor throw, or you drop the ball, you're out). You can then introduce rules like you can't pass to the person next to you, or pass back to the person who just threw to you. You could change the multiples, by using threes and sixes.

You can then move on to 'Super-speed bounce buzz' where the children are given very little time to catch the ball and pass it on to the next person whilst correctly saying the right number or phrase. The game can end when there are, say, five people left in, or it can go down to having a single winner. The great thing about this game is that it is fast, frenetic and fun. It definitely improves children's numerical, throwing, catching and coordination skills. Games like this can even help improve children's working memory, as they have to mentally juggle the numbers, phrases and various rules. Plus, everyone can succeed at this game – the children who win are not always the best mathematicians or throwers and catchers. And if anyone really dominates in this game you can always get them to put their stronger throwing hand behind their back and get them to play one-handed.

Humour and games can be a great way to punctuate your day. They can galvanise a tribe together, raise morale and reduce any stress or tension. I would recommend that all teachers add more of these elements into their teaching practice.

Residential and outdoor trips

Another way to bring the inner tribesman out of you and your class is to go on a residential trip. These trips often involve lots of time spent outdoors in natural settings with various activities, such as canoeing, abseiling, den building, orienteering and team building.

They are a fantastic way to bring your tribe together and push them out of their comfort zones (see Chapter 5, p. 77 for more on this). Not only do the children become more physically active and get back in touch with nature, but they also get to learn in a novel and non-conventional way. The children always learn lots about themselves on these trips and discover talents and inner resources that they never knew they had. I often see sides to my children that I didn't know existed



Figure 1.2: Some of Team Monet on their residential trip

when on residential trips, and it is often the children that struggle academically and behaviourally in class that really shine. Figure 1.2 shows some of Team Monet posing for the camera as they take a break from building their den. I am a big advocate of residential trips and have enjoyed every single one I have been on.

If you don't feel your class is old enough for a residential trip (the youngest age group I have taken away is a class of nine-year-olds), or budgets won't allow it, then a day trip to an outdoor activity centre can be a great alternative. Here the children may get to experience activities like high-rope tree climbing where they navigate round a course with various obstacles in the way (like cargo nets and zip wires). Again, the point is to get children outdoors and back in touch with the hunter-gatherer in them. The shared experience of getting round what can be quite a scary obstacle course will foster the tribal spirit among your team.

Key points

- Humans are an innately tribal species. Our ancestors lived in tribal communities based on familial ties, cooperation and cohesion. We still have our roots firmly planted in our tribal past.
- Tribal classrooms tap into children's primitive social instincts and create safe and secure learning environments where children feel that they belong, and are able to take risks, play and explore. This turns on their brains for learning and fosters wellbeing.
- Create a sense of tribe in your classroom by discussing the values and attributes of good teams and making your own class flag. Work towards becoming a good team.
- Ensure your day starts with a positive greeting and ending. Even if behaviour has been challenging, find ways to address the behaviour that show that you have high expectations and that you care.
- You may need to directly teach social skills to some children but, ultimately, the best teaching comes from modelling the behaviour you wish to see. Your tribe will imitate the example you set as the tribal leader.

- Play more games with your class to galvanise your tribe, inject some fun into your day, and reduce any stress or tension that may arise in the school week.
 - Tap into your pupils' inner tribespeople by taking them on an outdoor residential trip, if time and budget permit. At the very least, get them outdoors more and back in touch with nature.
-