

Guest Editorial

Sue Roffey, Marilyn Tew & Sandra Dunsmuir

AS PSYCHOLOGISTS, we work with many children and young people who have experienced a wide range of adversity in their lives. These difficulties can impact on their learning, their behaviour and their ability to form positive relationships.

For many of these children, school can be the most positive experience in their lives. The most influential schools are those which are managed and led by visionary people who understand the importance and impact of the quality of relationships for personal growth and learning. These leaders ensure that their schools provide calm, predictable environments with adults who offer quality learning experiences alongside appropriate support and help for social and emotional development.

It is not only the leaders who count, however. All too often, there is insufficient credit and acknowledgement of the professional sensitivity and care provided by committed classroom teachers who keep pupils on track and foster their overall well-being. They have the power to build resilience in vulnerable children (Benard, 2004; Rutter, 1990). Good teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards children and their progress, believe in the best of them and encourage their efforts. They celebrate every achievement, however small, and motivate students to learn. Within such positive learning environments, children are given structured opportunities to develop healthy relationships with friends, peers, teachers and other adults, in a context where constructive interactions are modelled by adults around them.

It is not like this, however, for all vulnerable students. Some come to think of themselves as failures because of the negative effects of comparisons with their peers. They may lack a sense of belonging with their

school environment, become disaffected and disengaged, which may ultimately lead to social exclusion. For many teachers, the drive for higher standards leads them to focus on getting through a crowded curriculum to the detriment of classroom relationships. These teachers can be so preoccupied with test scores that they are oblivious to or dismissive of the flow of feelings that infuse learners all day long. The risk is, that without a mindful focus on the social and emotional climate, this may become negative or neglectful. We all know teachers who feel marginalised and undervalued and children who are demeaned, belittled and bullied – and often bite back.

Relational quality is the foundation, not only for resilience and well-being but also the effectiveness of the learning environment. The recent publication of John Hattie's meta-analysis of 800 meta-analyses of effective education (Hattie, 2009) provides persuasive evidence for this. This issue concerns all psychologists, whether they are working primarily with individuals or as change agents within systems.

It is perhaps unsurprising that we had an overwhelming response to the call for contributions for this edition, from both academics and practitioners. We would like to thank everyone who took the trouble to send in abstracts and submit papers and also the reviewers who helped select for publication. We were particularly keen to ensure that there was a mix of articles from both academic and practitioner perspectives. The primary audience for the publication are educational and child psychologists who need to know about new evidence and theories that support their work. Our criteria for inclusion, therefore, included accessibility and utility as well as thoroughness and analytical depth.

Contributions to the edition address a wide spectrum of relational issues from the needs and development of very young children to those of adolescents; they include peer and teacher-student relationships and range from specific interventions to whole school and systemic issues. Most focus on universal needs but several include ways in which the social needs of more vulnerable pupils might be addressed. Some add to the body of evidence whilst others contribute to theoretical development. The first section of the publication addresses peer and teacher-student relationships and then broadens out to explore the issue of relational quality as part of school climate and the factors that promote this.

The first two papers are focused on the very young. Kay Mathieson and Robin Banerjee explore the beginnings of social competence in play while Fiona Seth-Smith and her colleagues look to the outcomes of nurture groups in promoting pro-social behaviour. An established intervention, nurture groups have recently received a boost from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2009). The next two articles focus on working directly with groups of children in specific initiatives. Liz Hampden and her colleagues write about the benefits of R-time, a programme which gives random pairs of pupils structured collaborative activities, whilst Alistair James and Gerv Leyden develop a theoretical framework for Circle of Friends – an intervention aimed at including more isolated students. We continue the focus on specific pupil-focused initiatives with Kairen Cullen and Joyce Monroe's interesting account of a sports-based activity with adolescents in a pupil referral unit and the difference this made to their ability to display more pro-social behaviours.

Toni Noble and Helen McGrath review good practice in 11 schools with low levels of bullying, together with an overview of the literature on peer relationships in schools. They identify the factors which help to make schools safe, caring and inclusive. Colleen

McLaughlin and Barbie Clarke's paper also draws on a review of the literature. In this instance they analyse 133 papers which explore the school experiences of young people aged 10 to 14 years and their mental health outcomes. The role of relationships in the notion of 'school connectedness' is identified as significant.

From peer relationships we move on to teacher-student relationships. Rosalind Murray-Harvey's study of early adolescents confirmed that both academic and social/emotional outcomes are unambiguously influenced by the quality of these relationships. Rachel Maunder and Andrew Tattershall explore relationships from the teacher's perspective, specifically in relation to bullying and found that relationships across the school influence how this issue is conceptualised and addressed.

The final three papers in the publication address process issue in systems work. Marilyn Tew outlines Antidote's work in schools on relational dynamics and argues that the positive emotions produced by conversations have a bigger role to play in generating change than the strategies themselves. Kerry Bird and William Sultmann analyse their experiences of developing social and emotional learning across the Catholic school system in far North Queensland while Sue Roffey's theoretical paper addresses some of the criticisms of the SEAL programme (DfES 2005) in the UK by making links between the content of 11 dimensions of social and emotional curricula with aligned aspects of school ethos and development.

This edition of the publication provides a wealth of evidence to support good practice. It confirms what many of us know is fundamental to the well-being and learning outcomes for children and young people in our schools – that the quality of relationships throughout a school makes a profound difference, not only to achievement but to quality of life. The following quote from the educational philosopher Ned Noddings is now over 20 years old. It remains as relevant and as urgent today.

'At a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other's company. My guess is that when schools focus on what really matters in life, the cognitive ends we now pursue so painfully and artificially will be achieved somewhat more naturally. It is obvious that children will work harder and do things – even odd things like adding fractions – for people they love and trust.' (Noddings, 1988)

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