Emotional connections: An exploration of the relational dynamics between staff and students in schools

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This paper describes the research-based PROGRESS programme that has been developed by the charity Antidote (www.antidote.org.uk) to help schools create even better learning environments. Starting from a baseline survey that investigates how capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included (CLASI), staff and students feel in all aspects of school life, the programme goes through two phases of data collection to uncover the hidden factors that impair the relational dynamics of schools and limit the opportunities for young people to become engaged in their learning. The paper uses examples of schools in three different phases to show how Antidote uses diagrammatic pictures to illustrate the interconnected nature of school relationships. It then describes how the insights provided by the diagrams generate productive conversations about how to change things. The paper argues that the collaborative, relational energy produced by these conversations, with an accompanying growth in trust and confidence, have a bigger role to play in generating profound shifts in teaching, learning and well-being than the implementation of the strategies themselves.

Background

ANTIDOTE is a charitable company that has been campaigning for greater attention to the social and emotional aspects of learning in schools since 1997 (www.antidote.org.uk). At the time, terms such as 'emotional literacy' or 'emotional health and well-being' were almost unknown in publications relating to the policy and practice of education in the UK, though they were receiving greater attention in academic circles. In the 1990s American academics such as Sternberg (1985) in his questioning of IQ as a measure of school success, Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1996) on emotional intelligence, Saarni (1990) on emotional competence and more recently Steiner (1997) on emotional literacy, were bringing these issues to the attention of educators alongside business leaders and politicians. By the turn of the century, the debate about the role and importance of social, emotional and relational aspects of learning had gained momentum, culminating in the Government's introduction of SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) in 2005 as part of a national strategy for behaviour and attendance in England (DCSF, 2005).

Between 2000 and 2004, Antidote ran a research project in collaboration with the Graduate School of Education in the University of Bristol to find out which aspects of school life enabled staff and students in schools to engage with teaching and learning. Three years were spent working intensively with staff and students in two schools across the age range of 8 to 16 years. A careful analysis of the data using grounded theory revealed five aspects of a school that impact on people's capacity to engage productively. They relate to how capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included people feel. These five dimensions (Figure 1) were found to pertain in the overall emotional experience of staff and students, in the communication of the school (both formal and informal), in the relationships people experience and in the way the school is structured and run on a day-to-day basis (Haddon et al, 2005).

Figure 1

CLASI	Organisational factors	Communication	Relationships
Capable	The school supports me to achieve my potential. The messages I receive are respectful, affirming and growth-inducing.	I learn more about myself through communication and have a sense of agency. As a result I feel in control of my ability to grow and develop.	People value me both as a person and a professional. There are formal systems where I can voice my view and receive feedback.
Listened to	The school promotes exploration of thoughts, feelings and experiences with accessible systems that permit everyone to voice a view.	There is mutual dialogic listening. This means that the situation could change as a result of the exchange.	People appreciate my unique contribution. I have good informal communication networks and places to talk about my professional development.
Accepted	The school supports me to be and develop myself.	Communication is warm. I don't feel put down or labelled.	I sense others understand me.
Safe	The school supports cohesion not fragmentation. It works towards a common purpose and takes care to ensure there are no unsafe places or times.	People say what they mean. There is a transparency about the way people speak to one another.	People respond to me in a supportive way, creating a sense of calm purpose in the school.
Included	The school places importance on aligning the personal and professional.	People are really interested in my thoughts and feelings and I feel included in discussions and decisions.	I feel connected to those with whom I work. There is time and permission given for people to talk together and create the kind of relationships that support well-being and learning.

Together, the five CLASI dimensions contribute to the well-being of staff and students enabling them to engage with teaching and learning. They form the basis of the model Antidote uses when working with a school (Antidote, 2003; Park & Tew, 2008; Tew, 2007; Tew & Park, 2008). The importance of engagement with school is also cited in the literature for its connection with health outcomes (Henry & Slater, 2007), health promoting behaviours (Carter & McGee, 2007) and developing children's social and emotional competence (Weare & Gray, 2003).

In addition to the CLASI model, a factor analysis of the research data revealed eight relational factors that affect the way staff and students experience school (Figure 2) and a strong correlation to a concept called learning relationships (Haddon et al., 2005).

Other researchers have made similar discoveries. Durlak (1995) highlights relationships as key to improvements in student behaviour and Haertel et al., (1981) showed that positive adult-student relationships promote better achievement and reduced social friction. Similarly, Wubbels et al.,

Figure 2: The Eight Relational Factors.

Relational Factors for Students	Relational Factors for Staff
Emotional safety for relationships	Emotional Safety for relationships
Time, space and permission provided by the school for relationship building	Time, space and permission provided by the school for relationship building
Sense of feeling connected to friends	The level of support received for my role
Sense of feeling connected to peers other than close friends	The relationships in teaching and learning
Sense of feeling connected to staff members	Sense of feeling connected to colleagues in the wider school community

(1991) showed how understanding, helpful and friendly teachers enable students to learn more, have higher attainments, enjoy learning, be more motivated and attend better.

The eight relational factors also link with a body of research seeking to understand the facilitation of caring relationships between teachers and students (Mercado, 1993; Tarlow, 1996). Tarlow (1996) noted three pre-requisite and constant characteristics for caring to begin – time, being there and talking (dialogue). Antidote's research supported these characteristics, showing that both staff and students needed emotional safety for relationships to flourish and the time, space and permission to foster and sustain them (Haddon et al., 2005). Other writers have confirmed the importance of connectedness. Newman et al. (2007) wrote about the impact of a positive sense of peer group belonging on reduced behaviour problems among adolescents. Gregory and Ripski (2008) noted that the relationships between adolescent students and their teachers had implications for school and classroom behaviour, while Rudduck (2007) wrote about the importance of student voice and engagement for school reform.

For adults, there were a further three factors: connection to colleagues across the school; the degree of support experienced in their role; and the classroom dynamic (for those who worked in classrooms). The factors described as 'connection' in this research seem to relate closely to Tarlow's (1996) concept of 'dialogue'. For Tarlow, dialogue is depicted as a means of building and maintaining a caring relationship. In this work, 'connection' relates to whether or not people feel they experience such relationships. In the five years since the research phase ended, Antidote has worked with over 80 state schools across all phases of compulsory education. This practical work is called the PROGRESS Programme (www.antidote.org.uk). It uses the models established in the research to help schools to create even better learning environments.

One of the key premises in Antidote's work is the view that a school's atmosphere or ethos shapes the social contexts, which in turn promote or inhibit emotional literacy, well-being or mental health for all (Antidote, 2003). This view is supported by the meta-study commissioned by the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) into what works in promoting children's emotional competence and well-being (Weare & Gray, 2003). This study drew on research literature, interviews and the experience of five leading local education authorities in England. The findings highlighted the importance of developing whole school approaches (ibid, p.6) and paying attention to creating school environments that foster warm relationships, encourage participation and develop pupil and teacher autonomy (ibid, p.7).

Antidote's PROGRESS Programme

The PROGRESS Programme (PROGRESS) is a five-staged, facilitated approach that enables a school to generate effective whole school strategies for making learning and well-being better for everyone (Figure 3). The programme begins at Stage 1 by identifying the issues from the perspective of all staff and students using two online, anonymous surveys called the Environment for Learning Survey (ELS) and the second Environment for Learning Survey (ELS2). The first survey (ELS) was developed through a research study conducted by Haddon et al. (2005). In this study, the scales derived from a factor analysis were subjected to reliability computations using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All the scales had an Alpha value above 0.7, with most having an alpha value of 0.9 and above. The survey enables a school to find out how CLASI people feel as a measure of their ability to engage with school life and learning. The second environment for learning survey (ELS2) is a non-standardised, school specific survey that asks questions to explore the data emerging from ELS, to better understand what contributes and detracts from people's sense of feeling CLASI. Stage 2 takes the findings from ELS and ELS2 and uses the data to talk about people's experience and gain an even deeper understanding of how people experience the school. This understanding leads to Stage 3, when focused conversations take place about how to make things better, resulting in strategies for change. The strategies are implemented in Stage 4 and reviewed in Stage 5 before beginning the journey again.

Finding out what is going on under the surface of a school is a complex business. It requires an on-going dialogue about the meaning of the data in the lived experience of different sections of the school community. Each person is encouraged to tell and retell their story at different points along the journey with storytelling taking many forms from scoring against questions in the questionnaires to anecdotal and perceptual snippets of information or more lengthy contributions, either entered anonymously online or given verbally in the meetings. The sustained dialogue is part of the change process, a methodology that is similar to narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is important to hear all voices – the quiet, the marginalised, the disaffected, the enthused, the engaged, the champions, the protective and the cynical to name but a few. The aim is to engage as many people as possible for as long as possible in order to ensure that they feel listened to and heard.

Figure 3.
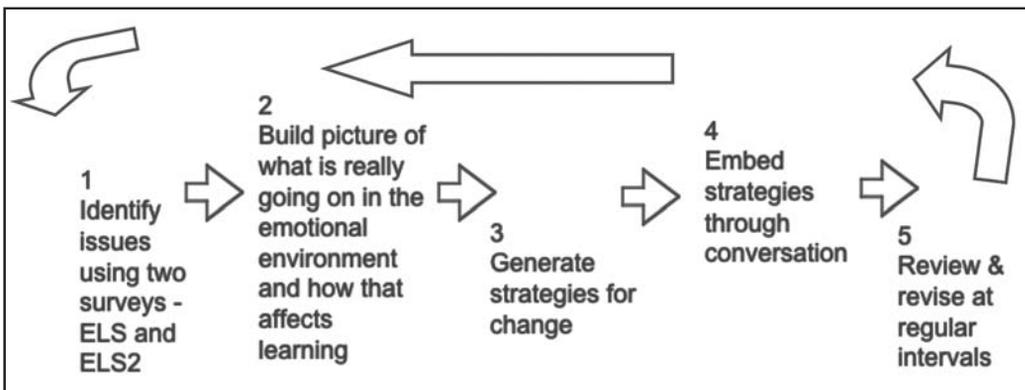
Developing a picture

The pivotal point in Antidote's work with schools comes when a picture of the relational and organisational dynamics is developed. The picture is a flow diagram, which is constructed from a careful, thematic analysis of the data from ELS and ELS2.

Constructing the picture begins with a careful reading of all the comments made by staff and students in the surveys, similar methodologically to grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Strauss, 1987). The analysis is supported by Antidote's software that constructs graphs of the CLASI dimensions for different aspects of school life. It also enables the data analyst to electronically tag comments according to categories such as 'listening', 'systems', 'formal communication', 'informal communication', 'staff-student relationships', 'staff-staff relationships and so on. The comments are then viewed against the graphs and from the combination, an organisational 'story' is created in the form of a flow diagram or picture. The picture becomes a visual working hypothesis.

The use of pictorial representations of situations and interactions as a trigger to change at either the personal or the organisational level is not new. Stories or narratives are used in knowledge management as a way of eliciting and disseminating knowledge and as a means of encouraging collaboration and the generation of new ideas (Denning, 2001). Therapists in Cognitive Analytic Therapy also use diagrams to help patients to re-story their lives in a more constructive and health-promoting way (Ryle & Kerr, 2002).

Links between the two sets of data (staff and student) are also sought. The hypothesis is that the dynamics of the staff experience has an impact on the dynamics of the student experience and vice versa. The picture often comes in two parts – one for the staff and one for the students with a linking theme or issue. This picture is the stimulus used to initiate and sustain further conversations in the school, though most schools choose to keep the student body unaware of the staff picture.

At this point, there is a move away from finding out what is or is not functioning well, to thinking about what would make it even better. The student body talks about the student picture and dynamic, looking for ways of addressing the situation and the staff engage with both the staff and the student data to find ways forward.

Exploring pictures in three schools

In the next section, three 'pictures' are presented (Figures 4 to 6). They come from three schools in three different phases of UK education – High School A, Junior School B and Infant School C. Each of these schools has given permission for their data to be used.

The shaded boxes show how the experiences of staff and students are interconnected. Even in the infant school, with very young children, staff well-being and the characteristics of staff relationships had an impact on the ways in which children experienced themselves, each other and learning at school. Perhaps more surprising is the ways in which children and young people see, notice and are affected by relationships between and with the adults around them.
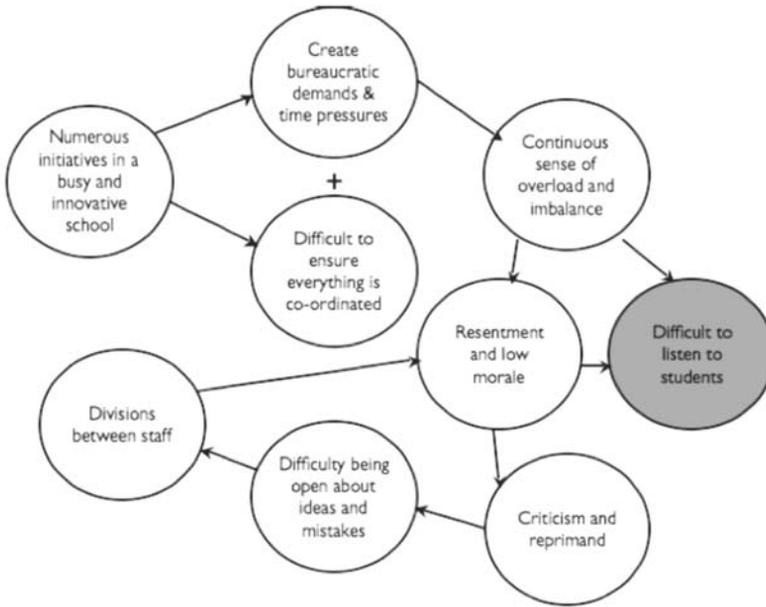
Some of the ways in which the pictures were used to bring about change will be discussed in the next section, including some of the strategies the schools implemented to develop better relationships for well-being and learning.

Themes emerging from the pictures

In the normal course of working in a school, the emerging issues and themes that make up the picture are kept within the school. The pictures are used as a stimulus for sustained conversations over a period of eight to 10 weeks, from which strategies emerge, that will improve life at the school for the different sections of the community. This process is then reviewed in a year or so to assess impact and consider the next steps of development. For the purposes of this article, however, some of the relational themes that occur in more than a single school have been drawn out and discussed.

Figure 4: The picture for High School A (ages 11 to 16).
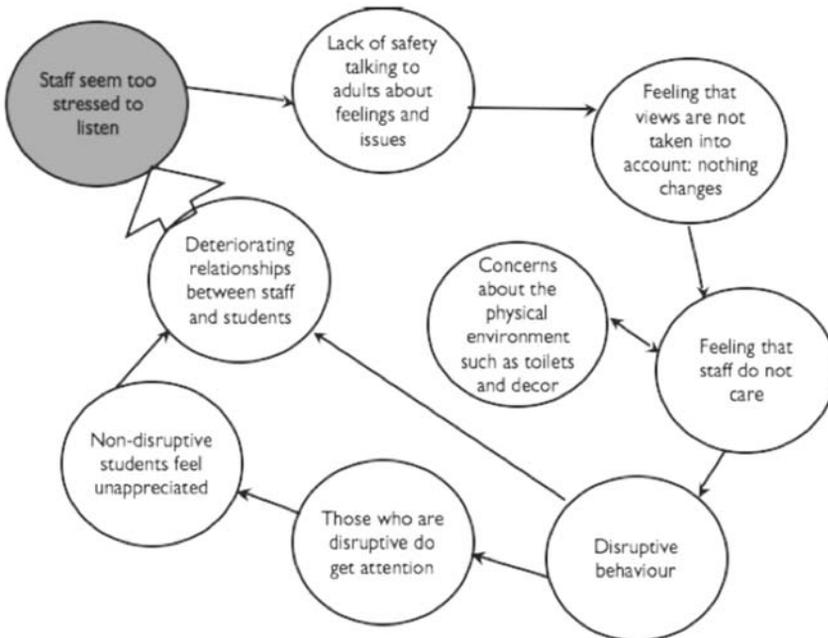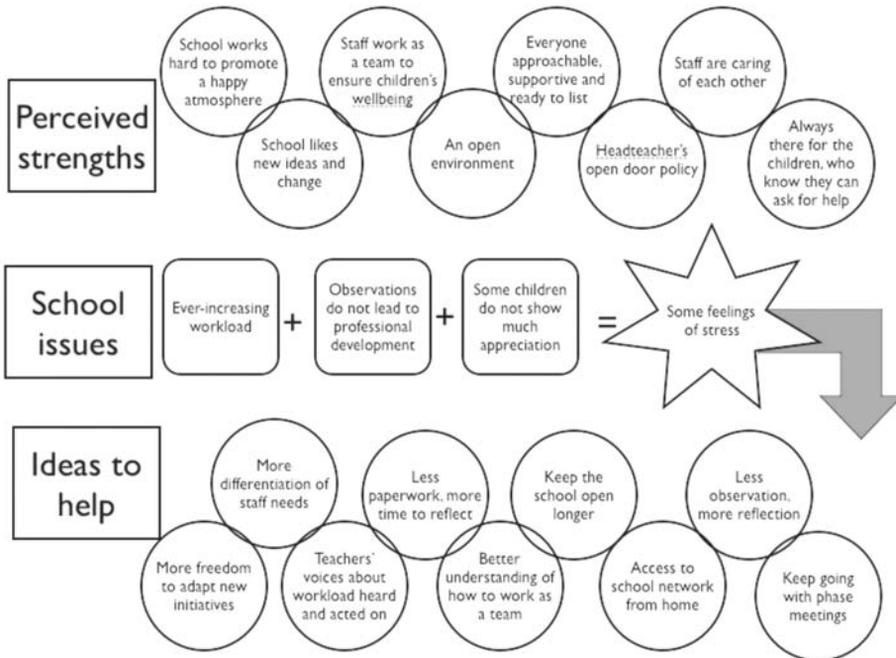
Staff picture

Student picture

Figure 5: The picture for Junior School (ages 7 to 11).

Staff Picture

Perceived strengths

- School works hard to promote a happy atmosphere
- Staff work as a team to ensure children's wellbeing
- Everyone approachable, supportive and ready to list
- Staff are caring of each other
- School likes new ideas and change
- An open environment
- Headteacher's open door policy
- Always there for the children, who know they can ask for help

School issues

Ever-increasing workload + Observations do not lead to professional development + Some children do not show much appreciation = Some feelings of stress

Ideas to help

- More differentiation of staff needs
- Less paperwork, more time to reflect
- Keep the school open longer
- Less observation, more reflection
- More freedom to adapt new initiatives
- Teachers' voices about workload heard and acted on
- Better understanding of how to work as a team
- Access to school network from home
- Keep going with phase meetings

Student picture

- Teachers listen and teach well
- You learn cool and fun things
- School is a chance to meet your friends
- I feel safe
- I feel good and important
- Teachers are often busy and stressed - need to calm down
- Children sometimes called names for being different
- Children feeling that they are less than 'real'
- More clubs and activities after school
- Let children be themselves
- Learn how to be nice to each other
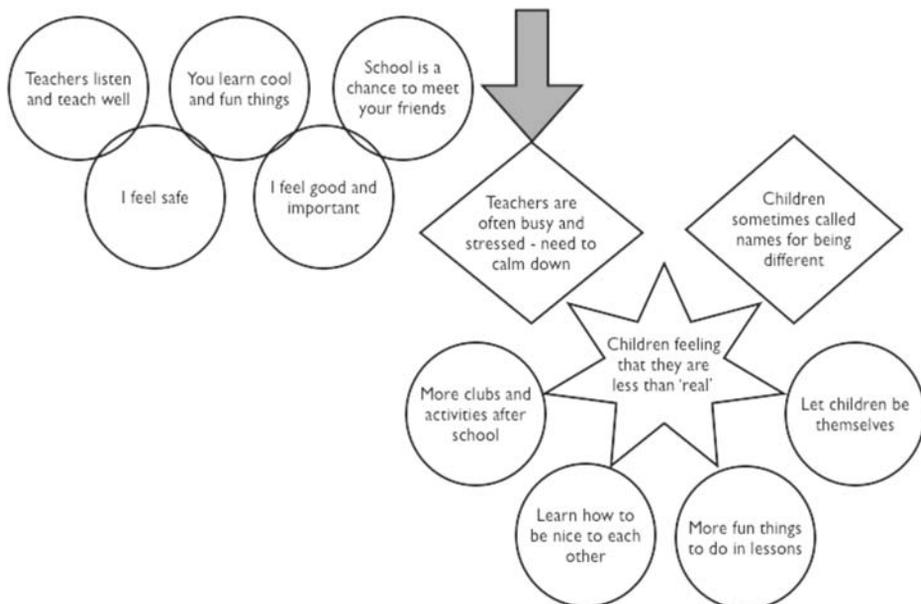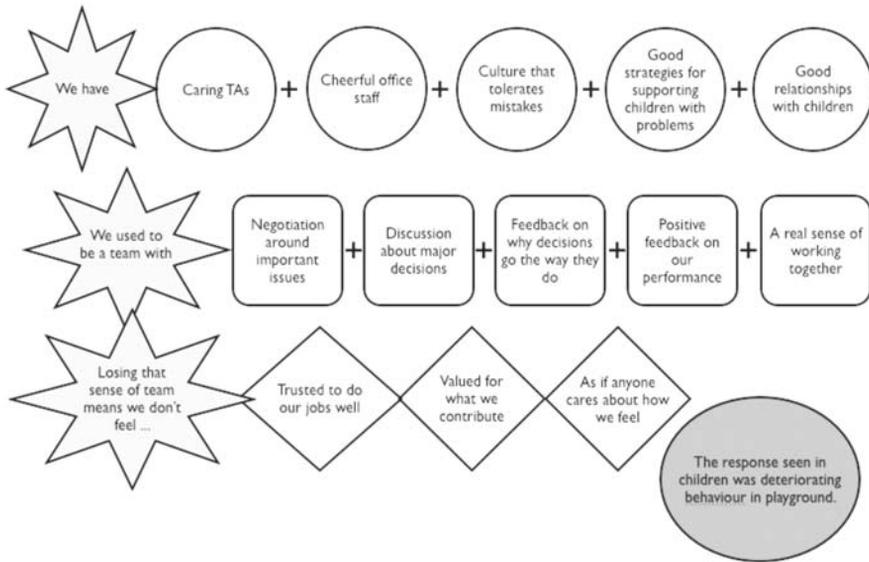- More fun things to do in lessons

Figure 6: The picture for Infant School C (ages 4 to 7).

Positive motivation

All the schools Antidote has worked in have many positive attributes and features. Schools are usually full of positively motivated and well-intentioned people. The staff, across all roles, works hard to secure the best outcomes for children and young people and in many schools, the students acknowledge the work done on their behalf. Part of the work Antidote does is to highlight and celebrate the positive aspects of a school before tackling the tensions and issues that often also exist. This article will not dwell on the positive aspects of the schools, though the reader can look at the pictures to see them, but focuses on the tensions in the relational dynamics, which these schools went on to address.

Rebalancing staff-student relationships

One of the recurrent themes in Antidote's work is staff stress. Eskridge and Coker (1985) wrote that typical symptoms of teacher stress and burnout are 'absenteeism, irritability, lack of control, and loss of caring' (p.418). Stress-inducing factors can be time, location and context specific, and/or

connected to wider political and social pressures which affect the school. Whatever the causes, stress tends to have a destructive effect on a teacher's capacity to relate to young people and to teach.

In High School A, the original survey showed that this was a school where the staff and students both enjoyed the sense of being part of an innovative, creative and dynamic school. The young people valued the opportunities and experiences they were offered. The staff valued the continuous sense of professional development produced by being at the 'cutting edge' of new developments in education. The senior team invited and embraced new initiatives and rarely said 'No' to any project on offer. The result was a school that 'buzzed' with vibrant activity. On the other hand, the adults were reporting high levels of stress. They did not feel that they had a moment to reflect and it seemed that the price being paid for valuing innovation and change was too high. People were beginning to be unhappy and depressed rather than energised by the challenges of working in the school. As for the students, their response to staff busyness and stress was

to feel that the staff did not care about them. They said that staff did not listen to them and their interpretation of the busy, slightly distracted attitude of adults in the school was that they did not value the views and opinions of young people.

When the picture was first fed back to the school community the staff was taken aback. They were shocked that the students could interpret their dedication and hard work as a lack of care. The CLASI data and the picture provided the starting point for thinking carefully about the school's values and strategic focus, alongside the structures and systems that either supported or made it more difficult to keep that focus.

The outcome has been a re-affirming of the core values of innovation, creativity and professional development alongside greater thought and care for the impact of innovation and change on the individuals and groups involved. Within a few months of seeing the picture, the school had become a calmer, more focused place. The timings of the school day and meeting schedules had been revised and, in response to staff requests, the next in-service training day was set aside to build stronger relationships among staff members. All these measures are likely to have an impact on the staff's capacity to be more authentic, open and fair in their dealings with young people. This, in turn makes it more likely that they can listen to students and evidence relationships characterised by care, which in turn are likely to result in optimal, holistic learning (Corneluis-White, 2007).

In Junior School B, though staff stress was a major part of the picture, the causes were very different. A recent Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) report had highlighted the need to improve the level of challenge in lessons and to ensure consistently high expectations for behaviour. A new senior team was working to bring all teaching staff to the quality of the best. As a result, teachers reported an ever-increasing workload and lesson observations that felt judgemental rather than developmental.

Some teachers were experiencing anxiety about their professional performance and this pervaded relationships among staff.

The children's response to staff anxiety and stress was to want them to 'calm down'. They felt that adults did not really notice them in a meaningful way. They did not give them focused attention but looked through them or over them. The children experienced this as a lack of connectivity with adults, which reduced the feedback they received about who they were and how they impacted on other people. This in turn affected their sense of 'realness'.

When the Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher were interviewed a term after they had completed the PROGRESS Programme, they reflected on what had been implemented and their perceptions of the difference it had made. The Deputy Headteacher reflected on how cross she had felt in the beginning when staff seemed to be 'going on' about workload and paperwork. She wanted to say *'What did you expect when you came into teaching?' 'That's what goes with the job – get used to it!'* However, she managed to curb her irritation and to listen to the discussion. Once people felt heard, creative strategies began to emerge.

The Headteacher reflected that a major outcome of the programme was that the senior team got to know staff members better. *'Knowledge about how different groups are feeling has really helped in supporting individuals and team.'* She also noted that one of the unexpected outcomes has been improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. *'Some staff have moved from inadequate to good as a result of the work that has been done.'*

Peer relationships and feeling connected

A theme that emerged in all three schools in both staff and student pictures was the sense of feeling disconnected from peers.

In Infant School C, the staff had responded to a change in leadership in a negative way. Staff in all roles had been required to change their working practices in response to the expectations of the

incoming Headteacher. They had been relaxed and comfortable under the previous leadership and though the working conditions had been very pleasant, the education received by children had been undemanding, leading to considerable underachievement. Changes to working practice and professional expectations had caused discontent, anxiety, loss of perceived competence and a sense of fragmentation in the staff team. The staff was angry with the new Headteacher. They blamed her for the discomfort they felt and were particularly resentful about the perceived loss of 'team'. Staff anger rarely resulted in direct confrontation, however. Rather it created an atmosphere of resentment in which requests became impositions and normal professional activities such as classroom observation, planning or meeting together were opportunities for discontent. The staff also noted that children's behaviour in the playground had deteriorated, but they failed to make any connection between their own resentment and passive aggression and increases in children's fractious behaviour.

The results of the first online, anonymous survey were, understandably, not positive. As the Headteacher later reflected *'It was like opening a can of worms. It was so difficult to hear all the negative views. It is one thing to know that they exist and quite another to hear them expressed in a more public arena.'* Inevitably, the majority staff view was that the Headteacher was the 'problem'. She was the one that needed fixing and then everything would be comfortable again.

As Antidote enquired further into perceptions, views, experiences and opinions, the locked relational dynamic became clear. A strategy group of staff that represented the different roles and age stages of the school was convened. At first they were reluctant to engage positively in the process of thinking about how to make things better. It took a long time for the staff group to understand how to address the core issue of the relational dynamics rather than blaming the head, but once they 'got it' they became

change agents and change champions in the rest of the staff group.

They instigated methods whereby staff noticed and appreciated one another. They listened to the views of the mid-day supervisors about children's behaviour and approached the senior team about splitting the playtimes by key stage. The positive impact of both these strategies created greater confidence in their own ability to bring about change. Perhaps more importantly, however, a new kind of trust was being established between members of staff. Louis (2007) wrote about the importance of trust to people's willingness to change and therefore to school improvement.

The outcomes of this process have been far-reaching. They did not stop when the meetings with Antidote stopped. In fact, it could even be said that the real impact only began when Antidote left. The uniting force has been a common ownership of *'the dynamic of our school and how, together we can support the best education for our children.'* The staff strategy group continues to meet and different people are asking to take a turn in making change happen for the common good. This is sustainable change that reaches far beyond an initiative or the remediation of systems that were not working. It is change that gets to the core and fabric of school life making the relational dynamics work for everyone and spilling out into the very best experiences for the children in their care.

In Junior School B, children's sense of not being 'real' was having an impact on their ability to relate well to one another. Peer relationships seemed to be well contained in the classrooms during lesson times, but fell apart when children went out onto the playground. There were arguments most break times and lunchtimes, many of which ended in displays of aggression. Disputes that began in unstructured parts of the day were not settled by the children and spilled into class time, distracting from the central purposes of teaching and learning.

The children's relationships have settled down as the staff addressed their anxieties and stress. It seems that as the staff calmed down, the children spent more time talking in a real way to their teachers. The Headteacher reflected that the children thought about themselves, what they wanted the school to do for them and how they wanted the school to be. As a result, behaviour has visibly improved. She said *'Sports day this year was a delight. There was no need to tell children off.'*

In High School A, staff felt disconnected from each other and so did the students. In this case, the students seemed to mirror the staff. The adults felt there was not enough time to complete all the competing tasks, so people did not have time to socialise or even to visit the staffroom. This sense of having no time was further compounded by some unhelpful systems such as different timings for the school day on different days of the week, which created confusion for everyone. Many staff said that they had lost all sense of a work-life balance.

Staff's lack of emotional availability set up an unhelpful cycle where some students grabbed attention by being disruptive and others tried to reduce stress by conforming and behaving well. Hastings (2003) noted that the poor behaviour has a negative impact on staff well-being and increases their stress. This makes them less emotionally available to students and more likely to encounter attention-needing behaviour. It also has a negative affect on student peer relationships as the quiet students became resentful of their non-conforming peers who seem to get 'rewarded' for inappropriate behaviour.

For the students, one of the major outcomes of PROGRESS was a more consistent and fairer behaviour system, leading to calmer, less disrupted lessons and greater student cohesion.

The sense of efficacy among staff and students

The emotional and relational dynamics among and between staff and students in a school has an impact on their perceived sense of efficacy. In all three schools the original CLASI scoring showed sections of the staff or students not feeling capable. Further enquiry led to a clearer understanding of why people feel less than efficacious.

In Infant School C, the perceived loss of connection in the staff group had resulted in not feeling valued, cared for or trusted to do the job. Connection and cohesion was sought and found in the smaller phase or year teams of the nursery or year groups and members of each team then viewed other staff with suspicion and even hostility. Whole staff discussion about children's development or sharing of curriculum ideas, plans and resources across ages and stages was lost to the school, creating an impoverished professional environment. The Headteacher reflected that counter-intuitively, it was giving voice to the negative views and perceptions and allowing people to work it through, that brought about greater efficacy. Difficult though this process was, the challenge of engaging with actual data – both scoring against questionnaires and comments made by colleagues –brought people face to face with the contentious issues in way that required honest, solution-focused thinking.

Another factor in increasing efficacy was the trust that grew between staff as a result of the staff strategy group. Some had been 'volunteered' and had no confidence in the process. One was fearful about voicing a view because it did not conform to the prevailing negative voice. The early meetings were difficult as people were not able to be honest and did not trust their colleagues. At the start most of the work of the group was about getting to know one another better and beginning to build trust. The group seemed to take a long time to understand what they should be doing but it is more likely that the outward 'work' of implementing strategies could not happen until the internal 'work' of building trust and confidence had taken place. In common with Louis' (2007) findings, with the growing trust came an

increased sense of efficacy and power to make change happen.

In High School A, the student's sense of efficacy was impaired by their perception of unfairness in the way they were treated. They had a deep sense of injustice that those who genuinely wanted help to progress found it harder to gain a teacher's attention. They were also resentful that lessons tended to be structured, teacher-centred and didactic rather than experiential and 'fun'. Their view was that disruptive behaviour led to tighter controls in the classroom and less opportunities for group or collaborative working or experiential teaching and learning.

Since PROGRESS, the school has revisited ideas for more creative learning and students have been trained to do lesson observations. Students feed back, not on the knowledge and performance of individual teachers, but on the learning. They comment on the level of student interest and involvement, pace, variety of activities and inclusion of different learning styles. This is a very positive result for the students as a majority view was that lessons were too focused on the teacher and teaching and not enough on the learner and learning. The new scheme of lesson observation will create an ongoing record of how lessons are or are not working from the students' point of view. The results will inform future staff development and in the long run have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

Staff in Junior School B also reported low on feeling 'capable' or efficacious. In this context, the structures for supporting one other and for disseminating good practice had been eroded. Conversations about how different roles experienced their work enabled everyone to see the impact they were having on one another. Several strategies were put in place for sharing expertise. They proposed supportive peer observations, a skills swap shop, and a central file with every member of staff showing their skills, expertise and interests. This meant that adults could be approached for their skills in many different ways from running clubs to supporting another member of staff in a specific curriculum activity.

Conclusions

The themes in these three schools reflect a similar picture in a greater number of schools with which Antidote has worked. Each school is unique in its personnel, context, demands and resources, yet all operate in a historically specific, political and educational context, which is having a bearing on the way they are structured and run. Themes are found repeated across schools, yet the specifics of cause and effect are different – the personal and interpersonal dynamics vary.

It is common to find low CLASI scoring for: students' sense of being listened to and heard in classrooms and in the more social spaces of the school; staff feeling connected to colleagues; students feeling connected to staff; students feeling safe outside the classroom context; and adults and students feeling capable (efficacious). Antidote's findings are that whenever the relational dynamics are in any way impaired, individuals and groups expend enormous amounts of energy just managing the situation so that they can come to work each day. Energy used to neutralise adverse dynamics is then lost to building positive relationships and to the processes of teaching and learning. It is not surprising that the research literature highlights the need to create an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) appropriate enviornments that support relational connectedness (Cornelius-White, 2007; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Henry & Slater, 2007; Newman et al., 2007; Park & Tew, 2008; Weare, 2004; Weare & Markham, 2005) and both staff and student efficacy and participation (Louis, 2007). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the relational dynamics of the staff body to be mirrored in some way among the students. Children and young people are influenced and affected by the adult relationships they see modelled and the ones they personally experience in their days at school.

The evidence from the work cited in this article is that there are some key principles in bringing about sustainable change for better relationships and learning in schools.

The first is that *everyone* has a perception and an equal voice that needs to be heard. A change process that will have lasting impact on a specific school, needs to include and engage everyone in the school, whatever their role. This is because the school is a dynamic system of connected relationships. No individual can 'know' the whole. It seems that hearing the voices and giving time and value to the views, is of considerably more importance than finding solutions to people's perceived grievances. Implicit in this principle is also the idea that people must feel safe to express an honest view – even if it is negative. The school has, therefore, to invest time and resources in asking questions anonymously in the first instance, and then to facilitating open discussions and debate. Rudduck has written extensively on the importance of hearing student perceptions and giving weight to their voice (Fielding, & Rudduck, 2002; Rudduck, 2007).

The second principle is that the focus for conversations is the data that illuminates how people experience the school. The data includes everyone's view but there is no place for finding out who said what, or for blaming individuals or groups.

The third principle recognises that everyone affected by the school dynamic has the potential to generate valuable ideas about how to make things better (Rudduck, 2007). Sometimes schools use question-naires to generate data and then rely on the senior team to come up with the solutions. Antidote's experience is that ideas and solutions can come from unusual and unlikely sources.

A fourth principle is that the best solutions are home-grown and context-specific. This principle goes against both the UK Government's tendency to produce national strategies and one size fits all solutions, and schools' tendency to look for 'quick fix' solutions. This principle is not to do with having to constantly find new and unusual solutions, but of recognising that people make strategies work when they believe in them and they believe in them when they have had some ownership in their generation Cornelius-White, 2007).

In conclusion, this article explores how to unlock the relational keys to even better teaching and learning. It begins with finding out how people experience the relational dynamics which affect the well-being of people in the school and then provides a forum for talking about them. Sometimes groups have entirely different, and contra-dicting perceptions and experiences. When all perspectives are acknowledged, it becomes possible for staff and students to engage creatively in finding strategies and solutions for making their lives, and those of their peers and colleagues even more productive and engaging.

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