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## 14. RELATIONAL SCHOOLS

### ABSTRACT

Today, educational institutions are complex systems. These have to engage students and teachers from many different language and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the issue of communication and relationships is paramount to stakeholders and needs to be addressed. The Relational Schools Foundation has developed an assessment that provides a profile of an institution, giving assistance to improving communication and relationships in the workplace. Research, to date, is encouraging. It is showing that attention to this aspect of stakeholder collaboration pays dividends in increased student progress and less stressful people relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

*Relational Schools* (RS) is a dynamic, mission-focused ‘*research, think & do tank*,’ applying measurement of relationships in schools, and consulting on how to ‘fix’ them. Through work, from 2014, it has proven its concept: *Where positive relationships are nurtured and developed as part of a values-based relational strategy, schools improve student outcomes*. The relationships played out in schools are seen later on in society, so the vision is to help overcome social inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The organisation has a robust plan to scale up operations, with support from individual donors and philanthropic organisations. Their seed funding, phased over three years, will help the foundation broaden its impact by:

- engaging in more ambitious and far reaching funded research projects with identified high-profile partners (universities, grant-making trusts, school groups),
- developing more traded consultancy business with UK and international schools, and
- building networks of clients, supporters and advocates, influencing policy as well as practice.

Relational Schools has been integrated from 2017 into the *Relationships Foundation*, a charity set up in 1993 to develop relational thinking and engage with policy makers. As the think-tank for a better connected society, it believes in building effective relationships with the family, community, public services and businesses. It also has a strong track record in incubating and spinning off successful charities

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and social enterprises. <http://www.relationshipsfoundation.org> provides detailed information.

#### THE RATIONALE BEHIND RELATIONAL SCHOOLS

A rationale for the *Relational Schools Foundation* – is a belief that strong, supportive relationships between all members of a school are fundamental. Where relationships are nurtured and developed as part of a values-based strategy, schools can help overcome social inequality.



*Founder and Executive Director of Relational Schools: Dr R. Loe*

This is based on the idea that relationships played out at school are seen later in society, and that developing and nurturing abilities of children from an early age, will help them repair and build communities in which they will live, work and re-create.

These beliefs are well founded. It has been shown that in schools, classified as ‘*relational*,’ students not only achieve superior academic outcomes but also enjoy other benefits, including reduced bullying, improved physical health and fewer absences.

The vision is to help build ‘*relational capital*’ in schools, by carrying out research, consultancy, campaigns, fundraising and engaging people in relational networks.

The work is informed and guided by the following values and principles:

- Widely-accepted values: honesty, justice, respect, care, nurture and fundamental human freedoms.

- Human beings gain identity, meaning & wellbeing in the context of their relationships.
- Individuals tend to flourish when relationships are good and societies when institutions enable relationships which are close, durable and fair to generate relational assets like trust and loyalty.
- Where such ‘relational capital’ exists, a society balances liberties with obligations; competition with cooperation; diversity with unity; privacy with transparency; rights with responsibilities; innovation with continuity and individuality with community.
- Values that sustain relational capital, include forgiveness, reconciliation and teaching of relational skills.
- Reform based on a realistic view of humanity: not simply individuals, but dependent on and fulfilled through their relationships.
- Relational thinking is inspired by the Judaeo-Christian tradition and provides a point of agreement on social & economic progress between people of different faiths and none.

#### OBJECTIVES

Objectives are aligned with the *Relationships Foundation*, to carry out applied research into the organisation and conduct of human relationships in personal and organisational life in schools by:

- Carrying out and commissioning research & consultancy projects
- Evaluating results of research projects and applying findings for public benefit, through recommending changes in the leadership, practice and management of schools
- To communicate findings and outcomes to the schools sector, policy makers and general public, to encourage improved organisational and personal relationships.

Achievement of these objectives are through:

- Provision of traded consultancy and grant-funded research
- Campaigning on relevant issues
- Fundraising with organisations and individuals
- Engaging networks of supporters and schools

*Research* demonstrates effectiveness of a relational approach in leadership and management of schools; practice of teaching – generating evidence to show a positive impact on young people, communities and society.

*Consultancy* will improve quality of relationships in schools using the strategy, leaving them with strengthened relational capital, capability and capacity.

*Campaigns* will promote the importance of effective relationships in achieving key educational and social outcomes to the UK and international schools sector.

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*Networks* of relational schools, teachers and international partners, will influence policy and practice.

*Fundraising* will ensure financial health and sustainability, furthering the mission achievement.

#### THE BACKGROUND

The Relational Schools Project (RSP) was set up in 2014 by Rob Loe and Michael Schluter – with support from the Relationships Foundation – as an education research & consultancy; a Cambridge-based not-for-profit think tank, developing ideas and applications in the field of Relational Thinking. The mission was to address present social, cultural and economic issues which have led to a decline in interpersonal relations because technology has replaced talk with less face-to-face dealings amongst people (research presented in Chapters 1 & 2).

The hypothesis was (*and remains*) that schools are both a space in which decline is visible and a site for corrective action to be taken, with short and long term impact. To prove this, RSP carried out a pilot programme in UK schools. Evidence shows that a focus in schools on relational practice develops relational competence in young people, enhancing understanding of communication and relationships, decreasing incidence of bullying, increasing wellbeing and improving academic performance. Armed with proof, RSP began its consulting and applied research business, to explore potential for partnerships with universities and other organisations and develop relationships internationally with the launch of a film and book – *The Relational Teacher* – to showcase research and demonstrate a relational school approach. In 2016, partner organisations in The Netherlands and Australia delivered relational research and consultancy in their jurisdictions. From January 2017, the Relational Schools Foundation formally began work as part of the Relationships Foundation.

#### THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS (RELATIONAL PROXIMITY)

*Relational Proximity* (RP) is a tool to illuminate the strength of relationships, by assessing core components, which are useful to consider in schools. Developed by founders of the Relationships Foundation and Relational Research, it is licensed world-wide through Relational Analytics Ltd, offering:

- a non-emotive, reproducible approach which generates actionable information;
- an equal voice for both parties;
- analysis of relationships between organisations, groups/individual RP has been derived from relational research. It describes features of relationships, defined in domains. These and their outcomes are shown in the table below. A multiplex model enables a more rounded and contextualized understanding of a person,

which aids the management of the relationship and helps to describe its nature in a way that can be grasped by a range of people. There is logic to the linear format as, for example, in the domain of communication, in which the encounter, if showing mutual understanding, will produce synergy to produce a positive outcome.

<i>DOMAINS</i> <i>of relational</i> <i>proximity</i>	<i>DRIVERS</i> <i>of Relational</i> <i>Proximity</i>	<i>FEATURE</i> <i>of relationship</i>	<i>EXPERIENCE</i> <i>In relationships</i>	<i>OUTCOME</i> <i>For organisation</i>
Those of...	Greater...	creates...	encouraging...	and producing...
communication time knowledge power purpose	directness continuity multiplexity parity commonality	encounter storyline knowledge fairness alignment	connectedness belonging mutual understanding mutual respect shared identity	communication momentum transparency participation synergy

#### THE EDUCATION DEBATE

In education systems around the world, there is discussion on how to raise academic standards and improve teaching and learning in austere times. There are debates about how schools should balance a need for high academic standards with requirements for students to develop competencies needed for life and work. Occasionally, these debates are framed around the role schools play in their social context. Rarely, however, do they consider schools as a site for the creation of society; a place where children first experience the values and norms which enable human-flourishing and cultural-harmony. Western societies are having to adapt quickly to increasingly unpredictable and fast-shifting global trends, but must also seek to better understand and maintain the values needed for social cohesion. Therefore, we must develop in young people abilities to relate to one another and to different cultural and social interests. Problems are created by dysfunctional relationships, which lead to low-levels of motivation and achievement in schools, playing out later in society as conflict and/or loneliness in communities, families and individuals. These are documented in the initial chapters of this book.

*Evidence suggests that:*

- students who develop positive relationships with teachers achieve better educational outcomes
- positive peer relations correlate with student motivation, engagement & academic outcomes.
- parent involvement with education is a strong predictor of academic success
- barriers limit capacity and support but not motivation.

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*By helping children:*

1. Maintain and develop deep, engaging relationships with friends and family, they will be able to negotiate modern technologies, which broaden social networks but make relationships more shallow & goal-oriented.
2. Understand the dynamics of relationships, benefits of compromise & negotiation – issues of social isolation & individualism (*low self-esteem, self-harm & suicide*) are addressed.
3. Develop empathy & tolerance, they will build strong foundations needed for global societies to thrive.

Children need to learn to be effective parents, neighbours, employees & citizens. Consequently, focus is on building strong teacher-to-student, student-to-student & parent-to-school relationships. Evidence demonstrates the crucial role played by effective relationships in improving outcomes, including wellbeing, happiness, friendships, security, empathy and, most powerfully, academic performance. Young people who get on well with their peers and their teachers do better at school. Moreover, through careful and purposeful planning, relational practices can be sustained within organisations so that positive changes are maintained.

Relational Schools aim to expand evidence from school research, using it to create actionable strategies for change and improve the relational ability of children, who are the next generation of community, social, business and political leaders.



#### ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Since 2014, 3800 students & teachers have been surveyed, generating 468,000 lines of data with consultancy projects in nine client schools & other UK organisations, along with presentations to TEDx Norwich, the Suffolk Festival of Learning, Wiltshire Pupil Premium conference; TeachMeets; Whole Education's 2015 annual conference, Character Scotland, the CSA's National Leadership Retreat in Broadbeach, Australia; Kenyatta University, Kenya, colleges in Johannesburg & events in Luiperdskloof. RSF will achieve its mission and objectives through work in 4 distinctive areas of activity:

#### RELATIONAL SCHOOLS RESEARCH

Analysing the quality of relationships in schools uses surveys based on the Relational Proximity tool, to identify areas of strength and weakness, relative to benchmarks. Data, from school consultancies, comprises a substantial body of work with significant aggregate insight. As more data is added, the potential value of this for the wider sector will be realised through research partnerships, driving academic credibility. Research grants will sought, with partners and independently, as well as work published using open and free licenses, including various media. A new film is currently in production, following a project with the XP School in Doncaster. Over time, the intention is to fund and academically support a series of PhD studentships.

#### RELATIONAL SCHOOLS CONSULTANCY

The Relational Schools model measures relational capability and helps to build it effectively, fixing problems and enabling improved, sustainable practice. Consultancy engagements – often but not exclusively following a survey – help schools evaluate relational qualities that enable positive change. An important element of consultancy is training and advocacy, transferring knowledge and theory into practice in schools and conferences.

#### NETWORKS & FORUMS

A network of teachers (*and others*) with interest and commitment to relational practices in schools is being built. This provides a platform for practice sharing, collaboration forming and a ‘*movement*’ to be developed. Forum members are invited to support through fundraising and using a crowdfunding portal like *Just Giving*.

Alongside a forum for individuals, a Relational Schools Network, comprising schools benefitting from engagement and those interested in building relational capacity is being formed. This will provide opportunities to learn from research and share best-practice through peer-groups at an annual Conference. Each school will pay an annual subscription with tiers of membership.

#### RELATIONAL SCHOOLS INTERNATIONAL

The aim is to build on existing partnerships in The Netherlands and Australia, developing an international network of Relational Schools research hubs, each an independent organisation in its own right, transferring revenue from licensed use of the research tool and consultancy services, but connected through the network. The impact of work in schools has been profound, suggesting ...

One area to address is *parental engagement* – an important predictor of student success and something schools find hard to do well. Through helping better understanding of relationships with parents, improvements will be fostered.

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Alongside this, an experimental shadow *inspection process*, to replace Ofsted's Parent View, is being trialled as a means of understanding parent attitudes.

"Our involvement as a case study school for Relational Schools has really helped us to recognise and promote would-be tacit knowledge. The word 'relational' has become commonplace in our school vocabulary and has become an integral aspect of our professional learning and dialogue. The opportunity to engage with evidence-informed practice has really shaped and strengthened our school's culture. We are very proud to be a relational school."

Helena Marsh, Executive Principal, Linton Village College

Another focus will be work with schools and policy makers to develop new data-sources for school improvement. The external scrutiny, offered by Ofsted and peer-reviewers, is not the only means of revealing faults and virtues, or identifying means for improvement. Important data is available from those working and learning in a school, or interacting regularly with it. Ways to gather intelligence from all stakeholders – *students, staff, leaders, parents, carers* – elicits what is happening and where opportunities for improvement currently lie hidden. This would help schools deal with issues before becoming problems, strengthen relationships within communities and build trust.

#### THE THEORY OF RELATIONSHIPS (COMMENTARY BY ROSEMARY SAGE)

*Relational schools* is a relatively new concept, but very necessary to promote in a world where technology has taken over and reduced the face-to-face opportunities for people to make contact with each other and communicate effectively in real, relevant ways. Research, in Sections 1 and 2 of this book, clearly indicates that less personal interaction not only affects development of higher-level cognitive and linguistic abilities, but shows problems people now have in communicating and behaving appropriately, when negotiating their lives and coping with rapid changes. A focus on relationships is now vital but cannot be achieved without looking at the quality of communication and how this is developed in *dialogue* and *monologue* activities in school.

There are 5 theories that support and illuminate relationship theory:

*Ethological* theory (Bowlby, 1969) emphasizes inborn, instinctive patterns of interaction. It focuses on patterns of interaction that the child naturally brings into the world and helps understanding of non-verbal communication activity and how it influences relationships.

*Psychoanalytic 1* theory (Freud, 1960) concentrates on instinctive behaviour of self-preservation and has become the broad outline on which theories of attachment are based.

*Psychoanalytic 2* theory (Erikson, 1963) focuses on physical, cognitive and linguistic developments and the effects these have on communication and relationships



over time. The 8 stages of emotional and social development propose a pattern of constructs which slot into other learning (*psycholinguistic & communication behaviour*) and show how relationships develop and can be successfully fostered. This theory clarifies why some people find it difficult to achieve successful relations with others and how crucial are informal and formal communicative competencies for effective interactions.

*Social Learning* theory (Bandura, 1973) concentrates on how interaction is learnt. The theory looks at responses of participants in exchanges and how these influence relationships in positive or negative ways.

*Cognitive-developmental* theory (Kohlberg, 1966) shows how relationships and behaviour depend on mental and linguistic levels. Changes in relationships are seen as the result of shifts in thinking and language ability.

Each theory of social and relationship development offers a particular strength when considering intervention and improvements. *The Ethological theory* tells us about early stages of interaction and indicates if this is not effective there are long-term issues that will need addressing. *Social Learning* concepts help us understand what happens over human life development. *Cognitive theory* illuminates the influence of communication and language on interaction. Erikson's *Psychoanalytic theory (PT)* combines several threads to consider participants in relationships and the context in which they operate, whilst Freud's *PT* focuses on survival and is pertinent to the concept of saving 'face' in exchanges.

Theories (*promoting a specific perspective*) help to explain the nature of relationships (*in and outside schools*) and the differences in communication patterns that are evident in informal and formal contexts (discussed by Sage, 2004). Freire (1972) has been influential in describing ideal school interactions and the Oracle project (1987), led by Professor Maurice Galton, in the 1970s, at Leicester University, was the first to focus on teacher-student relationships in classrooms. The review of these, this century, finds that communication competencies have deteriorated over 30 years. This makes relationships more difficult in classrooms and behaviour of students very much worse, so justifying focus on this aspect of school policy and practice. Therefore, relationship issues are vital to consider in today's schools, colleges and universities and must be a priority in developing effective academic and personal standards. It is excellent that the Relational Schools project is focusing on this problem.

#### DOMAIN THEORY

Domain theory, used to develop the assessment used by the Relational Schools, deals with partially ordered sets. The goal is to interpret elements as *pieces of information* where those higher in the order extend information of the ones below in a consistent way. Domains often do not have a greatest element, since this would mean *one* that contains the information of *all* others. It is useful in focusing on

some attributes of relationship interaction and the experience of the project is that a framework is necessary to discuss issues and their resolutions. Although no model is perfect this particular one has been found to assist in setting goals for support and intervention.

An important concept in the theory is that of a directed subset of a domain. This means that any two pieces of information within this are *consistently* extended by some other element. We can view directed subsets as *consistent specifications*, with no two elements that are contradictory. This interpretation compares with the notion of a convergent sequence in analysis, where each element is more specific than the preceding one. Interest is in the *limit* of a directed set. This would be an element that is the most general piece of information that extends all others of the directed set. Domain theory is a purely *qualitative* approach to modelling the structure of information states. One can say that something contains more information, but the amount of additional information is not specified. Yet, there are some situations in which one wants to speak about elements that are in a sense much simpler (*or more incomplete*) than a given state of information.

The process allows exploration of how an organisation is functioning relationally, producing a framework to guide development and decisions. It provides a tool for considering aspects of the *quality* of relationships but does not account for developmental changes that occur over time or what is known about psycholinguistic, information processing and communication theories that influence the level, patterns, direction and context of interaction. Lourenco (2014) advises caution (*as with any assessment tool*) in using *domains*, as it is easy to take variation changes for transformational ones. Relationships are contextual and variable in and between people, because of specific circumstances. As an abstract, dynamic concept (*although relationships in action are real*), it is resistant to accurate, consistent measurement, but there is benefit in subjective assessment. It provides a useful profile for discussion and a guide for development.

Relationships in schools are *competitive* in capitalist societies. Facilitating these will improve practice as they have a greater influence on school character, quality and student success than anything else. If relationships are trusting and cooperative, then a positive ethos pervades, but if fearful and suspicious then *these* qualities will disseminate throughout the community. Chapter 1 discussed that the '*politicisation of intelligence*' has led to '*intellectual dishonesty*' so that we fail to address issues that need effective solutions and this is seen in schools. Things often not discussed in schools are the leadership of the head teacher, underperforming staff, race and cultural attitudes, personal visions for school and institutional relationships. They command attention but are incendiary, so we cannot talk about them openly. The main *types* of relationships in schools is defined below.

## RELATIONSHIPS TYPES IN SCHOOLS

School relationships are often analysed in 4 ways: separate, conflicting, effective and collegiate, defined below:

*Separate*

The parallel play of 3 year-olds shows primitive engagement, when children are active alongside each other rather than interactive. This describes how teachers behave in some establishments and the relationship between one school principal and another. It was summed up by a teacher: *'in school, we exist in separate boxes,'* suggesting a self-contained classroom and an isolated group, barricaded from others.

*Conflicting*

Conflicts take many forms, such as a negative comment to a parent or colleague: *'Mrs Brown's class is always late out of school.'* We might with-hold information, which provides insights and help for others. If educators shared knowledge with one another, schools could be transformed. Teachers become adversaries through *competition* for scarce resources and recognition. *The better you are, the worse I am* and vice versa is how we might operate, endorsing the failure of colleagues rather than assisting them to successful and effective.

*Effective*

Fortunately, schools also have relationships that are interactive and positive. We see evidence of congeniality with people offering lifts, sharing resources and bringing in buns for birthdays!

*Collegiate*

School reformers talk about collegiality with people acting together. Evidence of this is educators...

- discussing practice with each other
- sharing their knowledge and skills
- observing one another's practice
- praising one another's success

## CREATING COLLEGIALITY

*Discussing Practice*

In some schools, a meeting begins with a participant sharing something learned that would be useful to others. A new teacher might bring up how students were assessed in a previous workplace. A parent might share in a PTA meeting an idea about homework. A principal might share with others a new policy about *language across the curriculum*. Repeated practice embeds knowledge and skill into a school system.

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### *Observation*

Making teaching practice mutually visible is uncomfortable, because we are never fully confident that we are doing something well or how students will behave with others present. None of us wants to risk being seen as incompetent. However, the best way of learning and improving is observing others. General observation usually has modest results and agreed criteria work best when...

- visits are reciprocal
- what we see and say is confidential
- focussing on an aspect for attention (how a student communicates in different situations)
- agreeing on the observation day, time and length
- debriefing and sharing perceptions

These criteria *increase* ownership, reduce fear and facilitate effective learning, but need sympathetic support.

### LEADERSHIP ROLES TO ASSIST EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Leadership is defined as ability to *foster relationships* and activity, which is easy to say but more difficult to do. To promote collegial school relationships someone has to remove all possible barriers. What else can a school leader do to promote a culture of collegiality within school? Warren Little (1981) found that school leaders foster collegiality when they:

- *state expectations explicitly: 'We will work together this year, sharing knowledge and assisting each other'*
- *model collegiality: giving positive feedback to others*
- *reward those who behave as colleagues: giving release time, recognition, space & resources to collaborators*
- *protect a colleague: 'I observed something effective in Ben's class so I've asked him to share it with us'*

Strengthening practice and improving a school is about a collegial, communicative culture in which participants talk about experiences, share knowledge, observe and endorse the success of each another. Without this, no real improvement, staff and student development, team teaching, parent involvement and sustained change will happen. Empowerment, satisfaction and work success does not come from going it alone but from being an active participant within a communicative, cooperative, collaborative group.

America has been energetic in developing the relational school. A prime example is *The New American Academy in New York*, supported by the Mayor, Michael

Bloomberg. The school has developed excellent relationships, by emphasising the quality of talk for everyone. Students are given regular opportunities to practice public speaking, with a focus on coherent narratives and clear diction. Professor Matteucci, in Chapter 8 (*the multi-cultural context in teaching*) mentions a project in which she involved the New York Mayor, reinforcing the issue of excellent communication for both staff and students in building positive, trusting relationships in schools.

This focus in schools is very important today. A Dale Carnegie seminar on *Workplace Performance*, in Northampton (July, 2017), was attended by many different business leaders. They were asked to come up with issues that most affected their organisation's performance. They all put *communication* and *relationships* at the top of their list. Discussion revealed the problems of technology reducing face-to-face exchanges. One Director said: '*Now we have less talk, we are losing the ability to use it for establishing positive relationships and effective work performance.*' The low standards of speech and language were also noted, giving rise to continual, workplace misunderstandings and lack of attention to what is said. It is time to give these issues greater focus in formal education and skill teachers with the knowledge and ability to facilitate these in their exchanges with students.

#### MAIN POINTS

- Schools are multi-cultural places with many languages now spoken, so communication and relationships is a major issue in teaching and learning
- The Relational Schools Foundation has designed an assessment to provide a profile of an institution's stakeholders as the basis for improvements in cooperation
- Research shows that attention to this aspect improves the school climate and educational standards
- This approach is applicable across national boundaries and is operating internationally

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Focus on student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, parent-school and school-school relationships.

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