



### What does it mean to work relationally?

Ann Morgan

*This paper explores the meaning of working relationally with young people and colleagues in the context of flexi schools. Staff perceptions of their practice were drawn from a research project conducted within the flexi schools. Data collection methods included a questionnaire (30 respondents), interviews with staff in the network of flexi schools (16) and written evaluations from a series of Reflective Practice groups. Developing personal and interpersonal dispositions that support educators to work relationally was discussed as a strategy for developing the capacity to work relationally.*



Working relationally with young people and colleagues was a central feature of the practice of educators in the flexi schools. This paper will discuss certain relational dispositions that were evident in the way educators in flexi schools talked about their work with young people and colleagues. Dispositions can be understood as a capacity to

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connect with the perspectives, interests and capabilities of others to enable enhanced action in the immediate social context for a particular purpose. Such a purpose could include problem solving and meaning making (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004) or supporting the direction of a young person's educational goals (Edwards, 2005, p. 171). Such a capacity to engage in this way may occur with colleagues or with young people in a learning space. Dispositions have also been described by Diez as something that matures in a gradual way "developing over time . . . influenced by context, experience and interaction" (2007, p. 390). A wide range of dispositions were evident in the practice of workers in the flexi schools and these were enhanced through reflection on practice.

#### **Being relational**

Being able to recognise the primary importance of relationships was a disposition highlighted by a number of workers. This disposition was evident when workers were able to prioritise relationships first and when they saw curriculum as secondary to relationships. Being relational involves a willingness to build genuine relationships with young people and colleagues. One worker stated that "the content of the curriculum isn't all that significantly important in the young peoples' lives at the moment and that education is much broader than As, Bs or Cs". Being able to engage with and maintain genuine relationships and connection with others required being present to others and genuinely interested in their wellbeing. In order to sustain these relational dispositions staff also needed to be able to recognise the difficulties of relationships for some young people due to the complexities in their lives. Staff had to be patient, accepting and understanding in relationships with young people and this required being available and

accessible to young people. At times educators found themselves needing to be challenging and compassionate in genuine relationships with young people.

### **Being authentic**

Being authentic and genuine was recognised as significant especially in relationships with young people. It was discussed in terms of being authentic and consistent in living the four principles of respect, participation, safe & legal, and honesty, acting on the principles, following the principles and internalising the four principles. One worker talked about the importance of being able “to enter into an authentic relationship with young people . . . around the boundaries of those principles”.

Being authentic was viewed as something young people could easily identify – “someone from the heart, not someone from the head”. He commented that “our young people learn from what we do not from what we say. They learn from me, from who I am, the person first, rather than the four principles, then they get it”. Being authentic was also expressed as being able to be yourself because “I get treated like a really valuable human being”.

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### **Being a Role Model**

Being a role model to the young people was associated with the underlying values of the context and embodying the principles in terms of being non-judgemental and treating people with “the same respect that you want to be treated with yourself”. This capacity of role-modeling required a disposition of being able to recognise the influence of self on others and others on self, including young people.

Being a role model was associated with being a co-learner with young people and this sentiment was captured by a worker who said that “I feel I have as much to learn from the young people as they have to learn from me”. In a similar fashion being sensitive to others and what the young people have to offer was another way of role modeling a sense of mutuality and respect in relationships. Role models also needed to be able to recognise the strength in others whether young people or colleagues.



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The disposition of being human was associated with “respecting the dignity of each person” and “the humanity of everyone – the staff, the young people and the volunteers”. Being treated in this way enabled young people and staff to recognise their own self-value and strengths. In an education context it was important for staff to develop the disposition of being able to recognise the balance between teaching and learning and the development of dignity and potential in each person in a holistic sense (Noddings, 2005). Another disposition that supported the fostering of this balance was being able to appreciate the value of humour and being playful or young at heart.

Whilst mentoring was clearly evident in relationships with young people it was also apparent between co-workers where more experienced staff were able to recognise the development of capacity in a less experienced worker and support this through being patient. In order for workers to experience being mentored by a role model in a positive way they needed to adopt a disposition of being able to learn through participation in doing and being, especially in relationship with others in the school community, taking in “the importance I saw from people around me and learning and doing and just being”.

## Being supportive and supported

Being supportive of others and being supported was perceived by workers as important in their ways of being and working in the flexi schools. When discussing staff support, the experience of workers captured in the staff questionnaire, indicated very strongly that staff felt supported most often within their local site by their peers and particularly through their site coordinator. In the interview data, the disposition of being supportive was expressed by one educator as a “responsibility to help one another out”. She experienced that support between staff within her flexi school community and found that “everyone is really supportive of each other”. Similarly, another educator felt that the support offered by staff to each other was characteristic of the support commonly experienced within a family. This was echoed in a sentiment expressed by another educator who said that she had seen “extraordinary acts of generosity and support” when people have “been in strife”. At times it was perceived that support also included being able to recognise the confidence level in others and support the development of this to enable positive risk taking in the learning environment and in relationships with young people.



The dispositions of being supported by others and being supportive of others were experienced frequently by educators in flexi schools. “Just being supported and that’s from the top down, it’s always there”. Support was experienced from colleagues, and frequently experienced from the

coordinator of the site. “Everyone’s been really supportive, the coordinator has been really supportive of my role”. For another person, the experience of being supportive in this context was about being able to work alongside others recognising that this was “different to pretty much everywhere else I’ve worked. So I’m working alongside them and I’m there to support them”. When discussing what was valued, another interviewee mentioned commitment and support. She felt that the commitment of the staff to the young people and to this way of working was valued. It included “the relationships and the communication between one another and support . . . making sure people have access to that kind of support”.



Another educator felt that staff appreciated “the fact that everyone is treated respectfully” and that this was a way of being supportive. Her perception was that “no-one wants to be in an organisation where young people are treated unfairly or without much dignity or like numbers”. She valued “the fact that there was no staff room gossip about young people or their parents”, highlighting that the disposition of being supportive through expressing generosity, care and respect was enacted and valued in her learning community. Some workers expressed the importance of experiencing support through being part of a unified staff team which was useful in being able to support young people. Supporting young people required being able to recognise the tendency of some young people to mask difficulties. If this recognition was possible staff could more easily enact being supportive of their growth and development to be happy with themselves, “with who they are and where they want to go . . . to be there for them”.

***Being able to recognise personal responsibility as well as a collective/collaborative approach to responsibility were expressions of dispositions of commitment by staff.***

### **Being committed**

Being committed was perceived as important by a number of workers who recognised that the young people needed to have access to workers who were able to make a commitment to them and to their needs. The commitment to this way of working involved: working with the four principles; reflecting on practice and on personal issues that may impact on one's capacity to authentically engage with young people; and a commitment to reflect and challenge oneself to be open to change. Being accountable to the school community was seen as a responsibility of staff and young people. The disposition of being able to recognise personal responsibility, as well as a collective/collaborative approach to responsibility, were expressions of dispositions of commitment by staff.

Finally, being able to recognise the importance of commitment and support in ongoing relationships with young people was identified as an important feature of this work. Working relationally involved the development over time of a range of personal and interpersonal dispositions that supported positive relationships between people in the learning community.

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**Ann Morgan** is currently completing her doctoral studies in education at Griffith University, Queensland, focusing on educator identity and development in flexi schools. Her interests include staff induction, professional development and formation to support practitioners in their work to enfranchise young people. She can be contacted by email: [annmorgan@ereflc.org.au](mailto:annmorgan@ereflc.org.au)

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