

Human Scale Education

Relationships as a
springboard for learning

By James Wetz



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Introduction

The paper takes as its framework the argument that we should recognise that we all learn in and through relationships. It makes the case that we need to create schools whose policies and practices are founded in a commitment to relationships – schools which put relationships at the heart of their design and organisation. This is not about education for relationships as a separate strand or programme within our schools, rather the paper argues for a whole school approach within which such programmes, be they universal or targeted, can play an important role.

Relationships as a springboard for learning

In this Occasional Paper I explore three themes:

1. The need to see schooling as more than just an educational project but one which integrates the education and the care of our children on their journey from early childhood to young adulthood.
2. The need for our schools to have an explicit theoretical framework, based in relationships, that informs policy and practice.
3. The need to make the task of creating emotional and social

capital in our schools a key educational process.

Finally, within this framework of a whole school approach and ethos, based in relationships, and with an emphasis on the three themes, the paper offers some brief examples of how smaller scale learning communities can make the importance of relationships impact on areas of school policy and practice.

The first theme:

The need to see schooling as more than just an educational project but rather as an enterprise which integrates the education and the care of our children on their journey from early childhood to young adulthood.

'The importance of schools as 'social institutions' is seen more clearly if we take into consideration that the family and school are the two main institutions which support young people on their journey from early childhood to young adulthood.'

When interviewing Linda Nathan, the headteacher of Boston Arts Academy – one of Boston's human scale pilot schools - for the Channel 4 Dispatches documentary '*The Children Left Behind*',¹ my first question was to ask her what was distinctive about her school. Her answer was not to talk of a specific programme or of the importance of an arts education for young people, but rather to stress that it was the integration of 'Arts, Academics and Wellness' that was at the heart of the school's success.

This is close to my view that education is no longer just an educational project and involves the integration of education with personal development and care involving, I would argue, children's safeguarding, child and adolescent mental health, and emotional wellbeing. Linda Nathan talks about the extended role required of the teacher as an adviser with a family group of students. She talks of relationships being fundamental to in her school - 'it is an essential building block of the school.'

In emphasising the teacher as the advisor – and while she is clear that this is not teachers being counsellors or clinicians – she is arguing for a wider role for the teacher and the school. In the interview the importance of this causes her to talk with passion as a teacher in the first person: 'I have to know my children well – knowing the kids well makes the school successful'. What is being highlighted here is not only the

wider brief that schools need to take on in relation to pupils and their families, but also the importance of a whole school approach to pupils' wellbeing within which educational programmes can be offered.

At a recent national conference organised by Birmingham Children and Young People's Services² it was argued that we need to see our schools as 'social institutions' with a 'pedagogy of wellbeing'. The concern was raised that our support for the emotional wellbeing of young people is often addressed through specific initiatives or programmes being inserted into the school curriculum, often leaving 80% of the school untouched.

The importance of schools as 'social institutions' is seen more clearly if we take into consideration that the family and school are the two main institutions which support young people on their journey from early childhood to young adulthood. If the family is distressed or cannot in sufficient measure provide for the quality of relationships, love, care, boundaries and consistent parenting that young people need on this journey, and have a right to expect, then the school becomes an essential resource for the wellbeing of young people. This anticipates the second key theme in this paper, that without a good enough sense of emotional well being learning becomes a difficult and for some deeply frustrating task.

The second theme:

There is a need for our schools to have an explicit theoretical framework based in relationships that informs policy and practice.

The key argument of this theme is that emotional wellbeing is central to the task of learning. As teachers we need to understand the link between secure attachment and a disposition to learn. Bowlby's³ theory of attachment suggested that children need a reliable attachment figure and a secure basis in relationships in order to be able to trust, contain anxiety, regulate emotions and be open to learning – and that these are some of the key outcomes of a successful childhood.

It is this early secure attachment that enables children to be able to trust in an adult, to regulate their emotions, to be open to learning and to take the risk to learn. Conversely, insecurely attached young people may be so anxious or hyper-vigilant to threats in their environment that they are unable to learn. It is estimated that 30% of our children in school have attachment difficulties which our teachers are neither trained to understand nor resourced to attend to.

In practice what would it mean if our schools used 'attachment theory' as the theoretical framework that informed policy and practice? It would certainly affect the way we talked with and about children. We need to change the current

discourse with young people – a discourse of regulation, control and surveillance – and replace it with a discourse of welfare, nurture and relationships. We also need to understand that the very difficult and challenging behaviour of some young people is a communication about need.

Biddy Youell⁴ in her book titled '*The Learning Relationship*', a key text in this field, argues that substantial changes are essential if we are to create settings where teachers are able to attend to the level of need that young people present in our schools who encounter barriers to their being able to engage in learning. She argues that we should give teachers the working conditions, the structures, a manageable number of young people to relate to, the time for reflection, and the quality supervision that they require in order to promote young people's emotional engagement with learning.

In '*Urban Village Schools*'⁵ I detailed some of the ways in which the current design and organisation of our schools makes it less likely that some young people can readily engage in learning. I argue that many children need a network of relationships within an environment that has a therapeutic disposition. Such a network of relationships that will hold and contain, protect, and provide opportunities for personal development. However the experience of many children in mainstream schools is one of

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insecurity and constant anxiety. The way the school is organised contributes significantly to children's anxiety, in particular the breaks around school routines, timetables and programmes; the use of supply teachers who do not know the pupils; the numbers of relationships that children have to sustain each day and each week; the change of teachers each year and during the year; the sheer size and anonymity of large schools where children do not know each other; the inadequate definition of the role of tutors; the lack of regular shared rituals; and teachers viewed first and foremost as professional subject experts. All these factors make the availability of consistent relationships which young people need hard to create and impossible to sustain.

All these factors and more militate against the establishment of a secure base in relationships and exacerbate the difficulties of less resilient children, those who have had less than secure attachment experiences. If a fundamental premise is that we need to design settings where children learn in and through relationships, then this needs to become an explicit task not an incidental outcome of the educational process. It is to this that I turn next in the third theme.

The third theme:

The task of creating emotional and social capital is a key educational process.

Children who do well in our schools have good social and emotional capital – we need to recommend this as a precondition for learning. Human scale settings where all staff share a commitment to build the social and emotional capital within the school as a resource for the young people make this more of a possibility. In such settings every conversation, every interaction, however challenging, with every young person, every hour of every day needs to leave that young person feeling better about him/herself and more fully aware of his or her contribution to the school community.

This is important for all pupils but particularly important for those children who come to school with little social or emotional capital, and for whom a network of relationships providing a secure base is critical for their learning. Where this does not happen then the costs are high. Experience of school is for many marked by feelings of shame and regret, disappointment and inadequacy. Children who do not have the resilience to manage the secondary school experience are often those who are excluded – an institutional exclusion.

There are many reasons why many children do not bring sufficient resilience with which to cope with the complexity of large schools. These may include: experience of discontinuity, multiple changes in family and school settings and little in way of permanence of relationships to provide a sense of

being known and noticed. For many young people there is a sense of being isolated at home and at school. They are affected by the loss of significant people in the lives, a hurt so often unexpressed, borne in relation to fathers who are absent, or who have left or have never really been known. These young people are often in conflict with themselves and their schools, acting out remembered hurt from their childhoods. Often the most disaffected young people are those who have lacked affection.

Our schools need to see this as one of the key educational tasks that they focus on – that is, creating the social and emotional capital that allows all children to engage positively in their learning. Children will be able to trust adults, be open to learning, be curious and to risk learning when they are in a community where they feel safe and know that the adults are holding them in mind. This is a vital contract between the adults and young people – most young people do feel supported but a significant and worrying minority do not.

David Smith⁶ in his Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime describes the importance of 'attachment to school'. Paul Cooper and Carmel Cefai⁷ take up this concept in their recent book *'Promoting emotional education'* and write of 'attachment to school' as being 'the degree of commitment and engagement with schooling that students feel. Students who have strong attachment to school have

feelings of attachment to teachers and believe that success in school will lead to significant rewards later in life'. 'Weak attachment to school' they argue, 'is characterised by indifference or hostility towards teachers and scepticism about the value of schooling'.

Opportunities afforded by human scale that can make a difference

If schooling is to be more than just an educational project – if our schools are to put relationships at the heart of their design and organisation and if building social and emotional capital becomes a central educational process – then would this be easier to achieve and sustain if our schools were smaller learning communities. The argument presented in this paper is that relationships are a springboard for learning, and that there is a reciprocal connection between the emotional wellbeing of young people and their academic achievement. Here I suggest in outline just a few of the many ways in which human scale settings and the primacy of relationships can support new approaches and greater engagement by both students and staff.

'Children will be able to trust adults, be open to learning, be curious and to risk learning when they are in a community where they feel safe and know that the adults are holding them in mind.'

'In the UK, typically, a teacher in a large comprehensive school will teach 250 children a week. By contrast, in some of the Boston Pilot Schools that are human scale by design, no teacher sees more than 75 students and no student more than four teachers a week.'

Implications for pedagogy

This emphasis on the importance of relationships may at first sight sound simplistic, but its implications are transformational. In the UK, typically, a teacher in a large comprehensive school will teach 250 children a week. By contrast, in some of the Boston Pilot Schools that are human scale by design, no teacher sees more than 75 students and no student more than four teachers a week. This reduction in teacher to student contact has far-reaching implications for the design and organisation of the school and a significant impact on the shape of the curriculum and the quality of relationships between the teacher and the pupils.

Closer to home Heather Geddes⁸, author of the recent book *Attachment in the Classroom*, also argues for smaller school settings. She sets out how attachment theory can influence pedagogy – the idea of a pedagogy of wellbeing which informs a teacher's work with children. She describes how attachment theory might help us to construct a model of schooling as a 'secure base' in which young people can work effectively – emotionally and cognitively – in a setting which offers them safety, security and stability.

She is convinced that size matters and that 'in the small, more intimate community of primary schools, individual difficulties are more easily noticed and prioritised' and that 'there is more possibility of

intervention at the inter-personal level and for integration of early intervention programmes into the policy and practices of the school.' She describes what she calls the 'learning triangle', which involves the presence of the teacher, the needs of the child, and the demands of the learning task, and she looks at how this can be used to address the different categories of attachment difficulties that children may face. She shows how this approach can leave children with a sense of achievement, agency, enhanced resilience and a positive engagement with learning. She presents this model not only for securely attached children, but also for children who have insecure attachment styles.

Implications for assessment

When human scale settings and the importance of relationships are applied to assessment the outcomes are significantly different from the standardised key stage testing which has come to dominate the educational assessment landscape in the UK.

With the ending of Key Stage 3 National Curriculum testing, and the increasing agitation from school leaders, teacher unions and parents about over-testing in primary schools, new approaches to assessment such as the examples offered here become possible.

In *'Urban Village Schools'* I give examples of new approaches to assessment that are informed by

the themes set out as framework for this paper. These include weekly group Assessment Reviews and Narrative Assessment. Here I give an outline of the way Performance Assessment is being developed supported by human scale settings and the primacy of relationships.

Performance Assessment, sometimes referred to as 'authentic assessment' is being developed and tested by human scale schools across the United States. In New York the teachers unions have negotiated with the School Management Boards an agreement to develop Performance Assessment. Essentially Performance Assessment allows pupils to demonstrate the knowledge, understanding and skills they have gained through their research assignments and to do this in settings which highlight the importance of learning to their peer group and family. It is the process by which their work is given its standard. One model of this approach to assessment is based on the idea of an academic viva. It is an active process in which pupils present and defend the learning they have undertaken in order to gain their standard but they present their work to a panel which includes a member of their family, two of their peers and academic staff and an external assessor. All this is a way of demonstrating a sharing, celebration and accountability of the learning of individual students.

Implications for teachers

In my field visits to the USA and to Denmark, the motivation and commitment of teachers in human scale settings was inspiring. There was a sense of professional leadership from staff teams. There was talk of their being a new sense of collegiality amongst them as teachers in these smaller learning communities. In one school the staff talked of their group being a professional community of practitioners. This is made possible by the human scale settings where there are only 25-30 staff, where time is made available for reflection, collaboration and supervision – in particular time to talk about how to address the needs of children they teach especially those who are finding it difficult to engage seriously with their learning.

There are many ways in which schools can behave differently when they are small by design. These implications for pedagogy, assessment and for teachers are just a sample. Being small is seen as essential but not sufficient, it is what being a smaller learning community allows the organisation to do that makes the difference. Ann Cook⁹, the head at Urban Academy made the point to me that it is not that teachers in small schools care more about their pupils than teachers in large schools – it is just that they have the structures and the systems that make it easier to make the necessary level of care that is needed available to young people.

'In my field visits to the USA and to Denmark, the motivation and commitment of teachers in human scale settings was inspiring. There was a sense of professional leadership from staff teams.'

Conclusion

- Let's acknowledge that schooling is more than just an educational project and acknowledge that our schools are social institutions with a vital role to play in the emotional well being and mental health of our children
- Let's replace the discourse of control, regulation and surveillance about our young people with a discourse of welfare, nurture and relationships.
- Let's create thoughtful schools with reflective practitioners with a grounding in attachment theory
- Let's exploit the possibilities of being smaller learning communities for new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment
- Let's make relationships the key principle to inform the design and organisation of our schools and a springboard for learning.

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Manifesto

A Practical Manifesto for Education on a Human Scale

Human Scale Education suggests the following seven key practices that schools might follow. These practices are facets of educating on a human scale and were planned originally to represent the seven sides of a fifty pence piece.

1. Smaller learning communities.
2. Small teams of teachers of between 4 to 6 teachers, learning mentors, learning support assistants who will see no more than between 80 to 90 learners each week.
3. A curriculum that is co-constructed and holistic.
4. A timetable that is flexible with blocks of time which make provision for whole class teaching, small group teaching and individual learning. Teacher planning and evaluation timetabled.
5. Pedagogy that is inquiry-based, experiential and supported by ICT. Assessment that involves the Assessment for Learning approaches of dialogue, negotiation and peer review and develops forms of Authentic Assessment such as portfolio, exhibition and performance.
6. Student voice involving students in the learning arrangements and organisation of the school.
7. Genuine partnership with parents and the community.

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