

Aspects of Flexi Practice

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What does it mean to work relationally?

This paper explores the meaning of working relationally with young people and colleagues in the context of flexible schools. Staff perceptions of their practice were drawn from Doctoral research I conducted within flexi schools in Queensland. Additionally, my professional practice and observations supporting staff professional learning and formation in flexible schools over many years, provides further insights into relational practice. Staff who cultivate a wide range of personal and interpersonal dispositions (or ways of being), and regularly engage in reflective practice, appear more able to enhance their relational practice with young people and colleagues in flexi schools.

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Working relationally is a central feature of the practice of educators in flexi schools. This paper will discuss certain relational dispositions that were evident in the way educators in flexi schools talked about their relational work with young people and colleagues. Dispositions can be understood as a capacity to connect with the perspectives, interests and capabilities of others. This enables enhanced action in the immediate social context of the school, 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). 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 relational dispositions are evident in the practice of educators in flexi schools and these can be enhanced through reflection on practice. A capacity to proactively cultivate relational dispositions, supports relational practice with young people and colleagues in learning communities.

Being relational

Being relational means recognising the primary importance of investing time in cultivating healthy and authentic relationships with young people and colleagues. This disposition was highlighted by a number of educators. Being relational was evident when adults were able to prioritise relationships first before focusing on delivering curriculum. Being relational requires a 'both/and' approach to relationships and learning. It involves a willingness to build genuine relationships with young people and colleagues and become a co-learner with others in an ongoing way. Relationships are the starting point and foundation for learning. One educator 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". Finding the right balance between building relationships and engaging young people in meaningful learning choices requires a new mindset and approach to traditional teaching and learning in schools.



Being relational involves a willingness to build genuine relationships with young people.

Being able to engage with and maintain authentic relationships and social connections in learning communities, requires being present and genuinely interested in the wellbeing of others. In order to sustain relational dispositions, educators also need to be able to recognise and acknowledge the difficulties of relationships for some young people, due to the complexities in their lives.

Staff commonly recognized that being patient, accepting and understanding in their relationships with young people was a priority. This required being available and accessible to young people. At times educators found themselves challenging young people, whilst remaining consistent and being empathetic and compassionate towards them.

Being authentic

Being authentic and genuine was recognised as an important disposition, especially in relationships with young people. It was discussed in terms of being consistent in living the four principles of respect, participation, safe & legal, and honesty. It meant acting on the principles, following the principles and internalising the four principles. One educator 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 more 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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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 is 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.

Being a Role Model

Being a role model to young people was associated with the underlying values of the flexi 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 staff member 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 they have to offer, is another way of role modeling a sense of mutuality and respect in relationships. Role models also need to be able to recognise the strength in others whether young people or colleagues.

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Whilst role-modelling and mentoring was clearly evident in relationships with young people, it was also apparent between co-workers. More experienced staff were able to recognise the benefits of supporting the development of capacity in a less experienced staff member. They could do this by being present and being patient. Adopting a disposition of being able to learn through participation, in relationship with members of the school community, was a strategy for staff to experience mutual and beneficial mentoring. One educator talked about taking in “the importance of what I saw from people around me, by learning, doing and just being”.

Being supportive and supported

Being supported, and supportive of others, was seen by staff as important in their ways of being and working in flexi schools. When discussing staff support, the experience of educators captured in the staff questionnaire, indicated very strongly that staff felt supported most often within their local school community by their peers and particularly through their school leader. In the interview data, the disposition of being supportive was expressed as a “responsibility to help one another out”. This practical support between staff within flexi school communities was captured in the comment 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 staff member who said that she had seen “extraordinary acts of generosity and support” when people have “been in strife”. At times, offering support included assisting others to develop their level of confidence. This can be cultivated through a growth mindset and identifying that young people and adults alike are all learners. Being a learner requires taking healthy and positive risks and learning from failure. Remaining open to learn is supported through relational practice. For those who may be on a steep learning curve, or who may be struggling to participate and engage in this relatively new model of schooling, the experience of being supported was vital.

Just being supported, and that’s from the top down, it’s always there.

Support was experienced from colleagues, and frequently experienced from the school leader. “Everyone’s been really supportive, the [school leader] has been really supportive of my role”. The experience of being supported and supportive in this context was also about being able to work alongside others. This was seen as “different to pretty much everywhere else I’ve worked . . . I’m working alongside [young people] and I’m there to support them”. When discussing what was valued, another staff member 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”.



Staff appreciated “the fact that everyone is treated respectfully” and that this was a way of being supportive. The same educator felt that “no-one wants to be in an organisation where young people are treated unfairly or without much dignity or like numbers”. Her perception that “there was no staff room gossip about young people or their parents”, highlighted that the disposition of being supportive included expressing generosity, care and respect in a real way on a daily basis in her learning community. Some educators expressed the importance of support by being part of a unified staff team. This was critical in terms of being able to support young people as well as colleagues.

Supporting young people required being able to recognise the tendency of some young people to mask difficulties. When staff understood this, it was easier to be supportive of the growth and development of young people (and of colleagues). Young people and adults are in an ongoing process of learning, of being content with themselves, “with who they are and where they want to go” and open to what emerges and unfolds.

Being committed

Being committed was considered important by educators who acknowledged that young people need to have access to staff who are willing to make a commitment to them and to their needs.

A commitment to this way of working involves:

- Working consistently 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 and learning as needed.

A sense of professionalism and self-responsibility was essential to being committed. Finally, being able to recognise the importance of commitment and support in ongoing relationships with young people and colleagues in the learning community, was also identified as an important feature of this work. This was especially pertinent in challenging situations.

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

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.

Through interview conversations and survey data, it was clear that a supportive staff team was essential in order to maintain the kinds of dispositions required of adults who work relationally in flexible schools. Additionally, a commitment to being open to learn from mistakes, and make amends with young people and colleagues in the face of failure and disappointment, are essential dispositions for all educators to cultivate. Having a sense of perspective by remaining non-judgemental and appreciating the importance of humour, were also identified as dispositions that supported staff in their relational work in flexible schools. Creating a school culture in which these kinds of dispositions are supported, learned and re-learned on a regular basis, is the work and responsibility of all members of the learning community.



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