

Making schools even better

Development director **Marilyn Tew** describes Antidote's approach to getting staff and students to work together on shaping an even better environment for learning

Imagine a school where student behaviour is under control; no serious bullying has been reported; academic results are above the national average. Should staff and students spend time thinking about how the school could improve the quality of communication and relationships? You might argue that there is no point in stirring the pot.

An alternative view would be that schools are like any other organisation: cliques form; taboos develop; conflicts bubble up; resentments simmer. Despite good academic results and the lack of any pressing 'problems', improving the emotional environment might well be the key to making teaching and learning even better.

Antidote approach

It was this perspective that inspired the development of Antidote's process for:

- promoting the wellbeing of everyone in the school community
- increasing their engagement in learning and school life
- enhancing the quality of learning.

The approach is built around the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS), an online survey designed to discover how far staff and students feel capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included (CLASI).

Our research showed that feeling CLASI enabled members of the school community to speak in an open way about the things that affect their ability to teach and learn, and to evolve through this conversation strategies for making things even better.

There are three important points to make about this process:

- The survey is anonymous. By persuading staff and students that there is no possibility of judgement or recrimination, we enable them to say precisely what they think and feel.
- What they say may appear to some as nothing other than 'whinging' and 'sounding off', but this may be what they need to do in order to reach a place where they can engage constructively in the search for creative ways of making things better.
- Hearing this information may not be a comfortable experience for senior leaders, and yet it will take them part of the way to finding how to address the issues that emerge.

One school

One of the schools that recently engaged in the Antidote process was a fairly typical inner-city primary with 350 students from many different ethnic backgrounds. The first impression one receives when

visiting the school is of somewhat cramped conditions: a narrow corridor passes through the reception office; the walls are painted in dark colours. Yet there is a buzz about the place: parents sit on chairs inside the front door waiting to be seen; confident children walk sensibly from one part of the school to another – carrying messages, running errands. All around productive, calm, engaged children are being looked after by adults who evidently enjoy their work.

The survey confirmed that children did indeed love their school and their teachers.

Many said that they:

- experienced the school as a supportive place where they were listened to and encouraged to do their best
- felt physically and emotionally safe in every part of the school
- had a sense of connection to adults, other children and their special friends
- felt positive about coming into school.

Others, though, described:

- children being nasty to them
- the playground feeling unsafe
- a feeling that nobody listened to them and that they did not matter in the school community.

A full picture of what was going on for students needed to incorporate both perspectives. It turned out that there was a lot of conflict in the playground. Although some clearly coped better with this than others, the impact on learning was negative for everyone. All the students were aware that the school would be an even better place if they could develop good strategies for getting on with one another.

Adult realities

It was equally true for the staff that building a full picture of what was going on required people to think about different sets of experience. Many said that they felt:

- satisfied by their work
- positive about the children and their colleagues
- able to speak their mind.

However, they could quickly understand why others felt disconnected from their colleagues and lacking in the sort of support they needed, leading them to say things like:

- 'there is a feeling of people being in isolated groups and not being part of the whole'
- 'people are not always willing to share with and support others'
- 'you can be made to feel belittled because of your position and qualifications'.

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It was clear that the main issue sapping wellbeing and job satisfaction was lack of time for meaningful communication with relevant people. Ideas, resources and talents were not being fully used, resulting in frustrated professionals and an impoverished experience for children.

Defensive positions

We sometimes find that senior managers respond to these sort of findings by:

- trying to fix things as quickly as possible
- expressing shock that people have spoken in this way
- trying to argue away negative reports as the views of a minority
- putting the blame on people's lack of professionalism or maturity.

By presenting these findings to staff and students as a series of charts, SEELS makes it possible for the findings to be discussed in a more open way. Our role is to stimulate people's curiosity. Why do particular groups in the school experience things so differently? What explains why particular issues have come up? By enabling people to see the school through the eyes of others, we try to ensure that the conversation leads to shared understanding both of what is going on, and what needs to be done about it.

Consultation

In this particular primary school, we found it helpful to discuss with staff and students some open-ended questions arising out of the original data.

Students were asked to think about:

- what contributed to children not feeling safe outside classrooms
- what explained the difference in how boys and girls experienced the school.

Staff were asked to think about:

- why so few people felt there was a sense of common purpose
- why non-teaching staff did not feel sufficiently listened to and enabled to realise their potential.

The information that came out of people's thinking about these issues was collated and put into a second survey. Like the first, this was confidential and carried out online. This time, though, it:

- was specific to the school
- enabled people to give their own account of what was going on – informed by their group discussions
- provided an opportunity for exploring whether particular views were shared by many or only a few.

Strategy meetings

We developed a diagram based on the new findings to show how the different elements in the school impacted on one another. By the time we came to present this to staff and students, we had been working with them for three months. By avoiding premature conclusions about what needed to happen, we had started to build people's trust in the

process. Seeing that we were really interested in what they had to say, they also became more confident that the process could make things even better for them. This helped them to be more thoughtful, constructive and creative in what they put forward.

What followed was a series of strategy meetings, bringing together teachers, support staff and student councillors in separate groups to look at how things could be improved. As a result of these meetings, they groups produced:

- a series of strategies they wanted to share with the senior team and other staff
- an account of how each strategy could be implemented and resourced
- suggestions for tackling time and training implications.

Simplicity

Although teaching and non-teaching staff met separately, they discovered that they had very similar issues. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they came up with complementary sets of strategies that included:

- daily, funded time for teachers and teaching assistants to meet together
- better use of noticeboards, newsletters and information files
- a daily staff briefing.

For the children, the strategies were focused on building better relationships and gaining a strong sense of connection to one another. They included:

- developing common rules for the different lunchtime games
- trained student referees
- circle time three times a week
- peer mentors, trained in conflict resolution.

These strategies are, of course, striking in their simplicity. You may look at the list and shake your head in disbelief. How could any school not already have these things in place? Yet this is the sort of picture we find wherever we work. The result is that staff feel less capable, less supported and increasingly out of control – firefighting behavioural issues rather than working together in a sustained, strategic way.

Also, as important as the strategies themselves was the experience of the whole school in working together on their development. They had learned to listen more attentively to each other and to take a greater interest in other people's experiences. They felt sufficient ownership of the strategies to get behind them, and to call their peers to account when things were dropped. And they had learned to engage in ongoing conversations with their colleagues about how to make things even better. Our ongoing role with the school is to ensure that these conversations continue.

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To find out more about the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS) and the Antidote process, go to www.antidote.org.uk, e-mail emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk or phone 020 7247 3355.

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