

# Emotional rollercoaster: calming nerves at times of transition

Transitions in school life provide valuable opportunities for building young people's capacity to become good learners. Such changes can also provoke many emotional issues. **Antidote Directors Marilyn Tew** and **James Park** help us to understand these, and reveal strategies you can use to help all your students to negotiate a comfortable and rewarding passage through times of transition

'Transition' is most often used to describe the period between the end of primary schooling and the beginning of secondary. Evidence that this shift leads to a drop in young people's capacity for learning and achieving has provoked a flurry of policy initiatives and practical strategies. These are designed to address the situation in Year 7 where students can lose the ability to deploy skills they had previously mastered, and can find it difficult, for example, to listen or follow simple instructions. Many seem to falter in their confidence and come to doubt their ability to make good decisions. This results in an overdependence on reassurance from an adult to ensure that they are 'getting it right'.

## Building resilience

What can too easily be overlooked in this focus on primary-secondary transition is the fact that change is a continuous feature of schooling. Learning itself is a process of transition, a move from a state of not being able to do something towards being able to do it. For some students, particularly those from families that do not have a history of academic achievement, embracing the idea of yourself as a good learner is the biggest leap of all.

Consider too the move from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. This does not usually involve a change of school, but it does require students to find ways of working with new teaching personnel, sometimes including another tutor, and different teaching groups. These types of changes happen many times during a young person's school career. They can even happen several times during a normal week, as regular staff go ill, take courses or have appointments either inside or outside school.

Young people also experience change when they are put into a new teaching context, such as another tutor group or a different set for maths or English. These require them to adapt to new people and situations. In a single day, students routinely undergo transitions from one member of staff to another, from one teaching style to something different, from one geographical location to a new one, from one set of expectations to another one.

For many young people, change is an even bigger feature of their lives, as a result of shifts in family circumstances, such as a move to a new geographical location. Students whose families are in the armed forces may make many such moves, as do children of travellers and migrant workers.

If we are to learn well, we need to be able to embrace change and feel positive about it. To make that happen, those who are responsible for the school curriculum need to be looking at how they can use all the moments when students undergo a transition as

opportunities for building the resilience they need to deal well with the challenge of change. Central to young people's capacity to cope with change is the quality of their relationships – both with adults and with each other.

## Impact on wellbeing

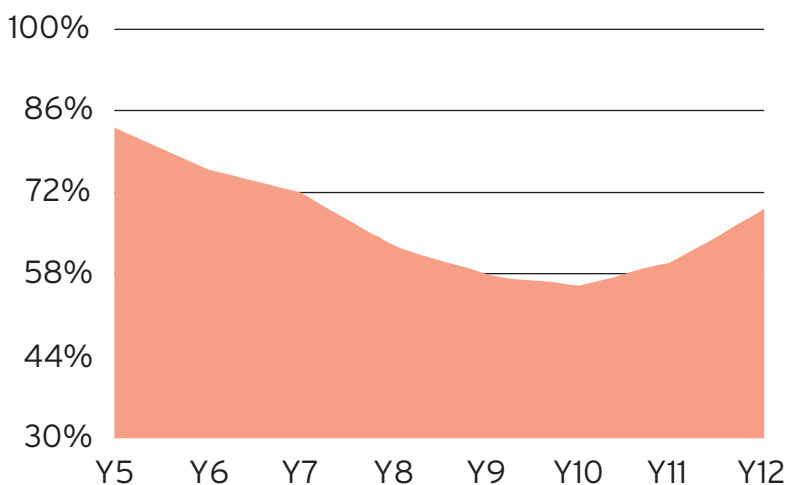
The risks involved in not helping young people to deal with these many changes were highlighted by data we collected from schools working with us to shape an even better environment for learning. This work uses an online survey tool, the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS) to find out from students (and staff) how they rate the quality of their relationships and their general wellbeing in the school.

SEELS was developed by Antidote out of three years of intensive work in two London schools, one primary and one secondary, exploring how emotional literacy could enhance learning and wellbeing for adults and students. All members of the school community complete the survey by giving their personal response to a range of questions relating to communication, relationships, school systems and emotional experiences. The results of the initial survey are used to start an open conversation in the school on how to make learning even better for everyone involved.

During 2006, SEELS was used with 8,000 young people between the ages of 8 and 16. The resulting data shows that, between Year 5 and Year 10, students reported a 26% decline in their wellbeing – see the

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**Wellbeing between Years 5 and 12 as measured by the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey**



(Source: Antidote)

diagram at the bottom of page 21. While their friendships remained strong, they felt increasingly disconnected from both adults and peers in the school. Interestingly, there was a more significant drop in wellbeing between Years 5 and 6, and between Years 7 and 8, than there was between Years 6 and 7 – the customary focus of concern.

By the beginning of their GCSE courses, more than half of students indicated that they did not feel valued as a person or a learner, by adults or by their peers. Similarly, they did not feel that others understood them, or appreciated the unique contribution they made to the life of the school. To a significant degree, they did not believe that others would respond to them in a supportive way.

Our research with the University of Bristol (see: [www.antidote.org.uk/initiative.html](http://www.antidote.org.uk/initiative.html)) shows that students learn better when they feel capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included (CLASI). The steady decline in young people’s sense of wellbeing across Key Stage 3 and 4 will be having an impact on their engagement with, and capacity to learn.

This work suggests that, at a time when they are searching for an identity – a core sense of who they are and what they are – change is too often experienced by young people as imposed, meaningless and uncomfortable.

**Promoting wellbeing**

Schools have used the SEELS data to engage students, teaching and support staff in open conversations on how to make learning even better. Even within one school, views vary widely. Our process is designed to enable everyone to make a contribution to the development of strategies that will enhance wellbeing across the school

**Each individual’s ability to gain positive benefits from a new situation is largely dependent on their ability to recognise and manage their own unique emotional responses**

community. These strategies might include:

- peer mentors in the playground
- student listening systems
- referees and pupil playleaders for playground games
- circle or relationship time in class
- mixing up students so that they get to know each other in teaching groups
- active, experiential groupwork to create connections between students.

Sometimes students identify particular areas of the school or playground that may be making them feel unsafe. Strategies to address this include:

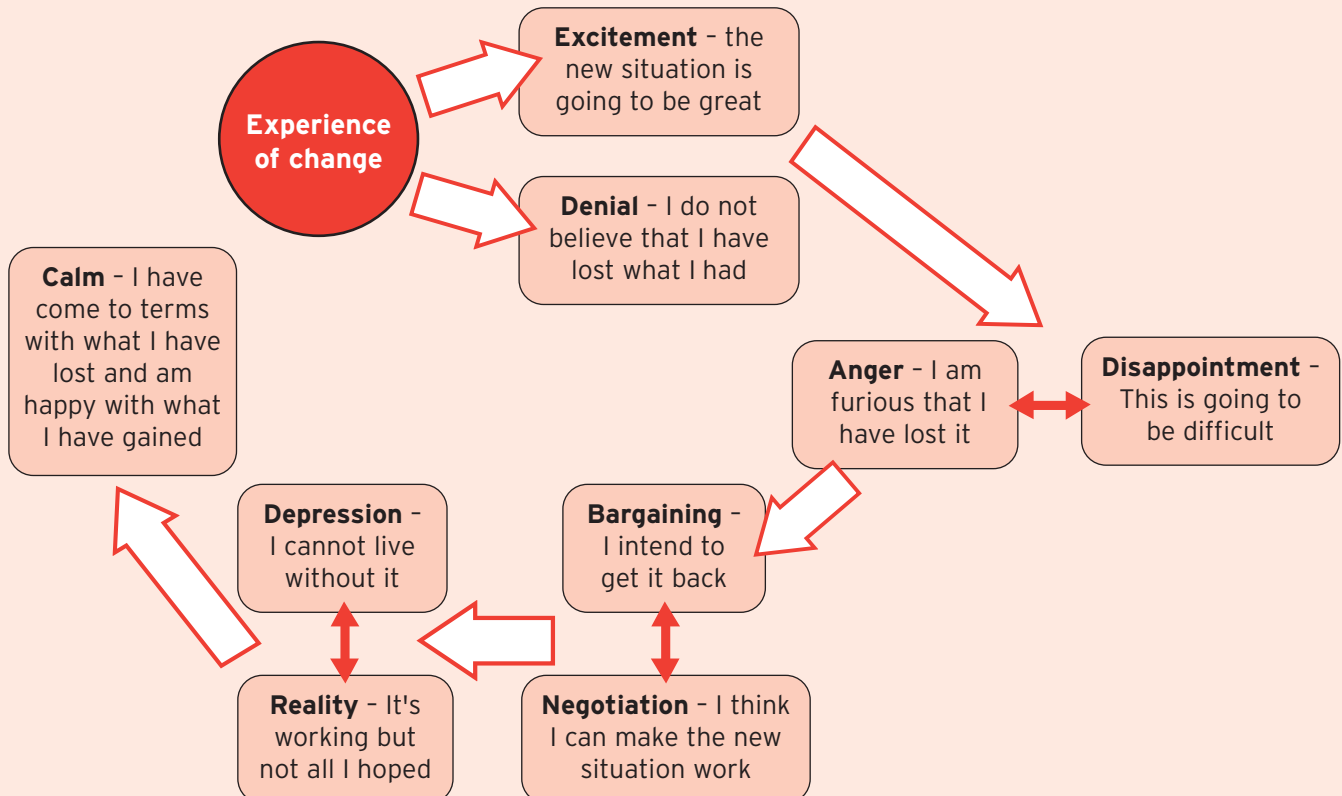
- changing the way supervision is organised
- working towards more autonomous and responsible behaviour through student-led assemblies and school codes of conduct.

For staff, strategies often emerge out of frustration with communication systems and include:

- better use of noticeboards
- daily or weekly bulletins
- introduction files for new students and staff
- better use of and access to ICT and the virtual learning environment (VLE)
- funded meeting times for support and teaching staff
- clear job descriptions that are centrally held and accessible.

There are no magical strategies to improve wellbeing across all schools. The key to this type of work is to provide realistic feedback in a safe space where open conversations can take place, then to hold the space open long enough for people to begin to voice creative strategies and solutions for their particular school situation.

**Model to aid understanding of emotions associated with change**



## Intense emotions

Primary-secondary transition is sometimes written about as an experience of loss for young people, to be understood in terms of the processes associated with mourning and grief:

- denial – I do not believe that I have lost it
- anger – I am furious that I have lost it
- bargaining – I am going to work out a way to get it back
- depression – I cannot live without it
- acceptance – the intense pain has gone and I am ready to move on.

See the diagram on page 22 to understand more about emotions associated with change. Depicting things in this way reflects our sense that there is something cosy and comfortable about primary school – with its solid pattern of one-to-one relationships – and that it is very difficult to tolerate losing it. The bustle, scale and complexity of secondary schools is depicted as an unfortunate necessity, something to be endured rather than negotiated and embraced.

The story young people tell us is somewhat different from this. Some talk of finding the parameters put around their lives in primary school as constricting,

and of finding the opportunities provided by secondary school immensely exciting. A group of Year 7 students from one large inner-London secondary school were proud to conclude from their immense achievement in mastering secondary ways that they were extremely good at ‘changing and learning’.

All change involves loss and, for some, the experience of loss may be particularly intense. They may, as a result, become angry and agitated; try to negotiate their way back into the comfortable place where they were before; they may even become depressed, leading to listlessness and loss of motivation. However, change also involves potential gain. That sense of gain may, for some, significantly outweigh any feelings of loss.

Probably for most students there are feelings of intense ambivalence around any change. Yes, there are things that I have lost. Yes, there are things that I have gained. How should I place myself in relation to these changes? Should I regret them? Should I celebrate them? What follows is a rather confusing loss-gain cycle that might look something like the diagram on page 22.

The confusion arising from this type of journey through ambivalence will sometimes provoke anger, particularly when young people are expected to

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## Responses to change

### Challenge seeking

These people thrive on change. They initiate change and look for it. They become bored when things remain the same for any period of time and they like the challenge that change brings to their attitudes, values and belief systems. They like to know what changes are coming up and what challenges will be presented. They want to have personal investment in the changes that take place.

*It is likely that these students have had secure relationships and stable experiences in their early years. They have developed a good sense of self and a confident foundation from which to explore.*

### Just surviving

These people respond to change with fear. They are unable to think, learn and organise themselves around what is happening to them. They often withdraw. They may have attacks of pure panic, or they may respond by being overly aggressive or defensive. These students can be uncooperative, obstructive, verbally abusive, physically aggressive or silently withdrawn. They are fragile and in need of protection rather than challenge. They benefit from keeping their routine as constant as possible.

*It is probable that many of the students who are fragile in the face of change are those who have experienced insecure or disrupted relationships in their formative years. Their internal insecurity makes any change much more traumatic than it is for others.*

### Structuring

These people tend to become overwhelmed, confused and disorganised during a period of change. They can become argumentative or unable to learn due to the sense of confusion. These students are likely to respond to transitions by being sick. If they stay in school, they will probably lose their homework, forget the notes, planners, PE kit and technology equipment. They will appear incompetent and overly stressed. They may become difficult or angry with their peers as a way of releasing their feelings. On the other hand, they may withdraw and refuse to deal with the new situation, its rules and demands.

*These students cope best if they have a parent figure to help them to deal with changes. They like to know there is someone in the new situation who will make them feel safe and secure as well as helping them to adjust to the changes at a pace they can handle.*

### Reflecting

These people like change and will initiate it in their lives. They look for ways to change their outlook, rather than trying to change outside conditions. These are the students who can find different ways of looking at things and like to have an influence on events by altering their intentions and desires. They can always find a different way of thinking about situations and events. The way they feel and behave follows from the way they choose to perceive the changes they are facing.

*These students need to understand the reasons behind the changes. Their ability to think differently can be very helpful as a calming influence for other people. They are most able to cope and be of maximum help in the face of change if they are told about the coming changes and have time to help prepare others. They are most effective if they can see the change as a positive one and can translate that message to others who are more fearful.*

**Schools often pay attention to beginnings, but are less careful with endings**

**When students are given time, space and permission to explore emotional responses to loss and change, they have more chance of finding positive ways of dealing with their feelings and returning to a state of calm**

## Aims of transition management

- Build points of stability in students' lives, essentially by looking after the quality of relationships at all levels. Has the new group of students been given time to get to know each other? Has the relationship that is ending been properly closed? Is there a way of resolving the conflict and misunderstanding? Has somebody been given the responsibility for looking after the new person who has just joined the class or group?
- Make time for the feelings around change to be shared, thought about and dealt with so that people can deal with their sadness and excitement and build relationships through realising that they are not alone in what they are going through.
- Give people a say in the changes that happen to them so that people are more likely to feel powerful because they feel in control of some aspect of the change that is happening, rather than powerless because it is experienced as something that is being done to them.

'accept reality' rather than offered a way to understand their feelings. Equally, a number of students will express their feelings in terms of disappointment and depression. These students do not have angry outbursts, but turn their emotions inwards, quietly retreating into the background. They often become invisible to adults whose attention is diverted by more vocal and challenging members of the group.

When students are given time, space and permission to explore emotional responses to loss and change, they have more chance of finding positive ways of dealing with their feelings and returning to a state of calm. Models (such as the one shown in the diagram on page 22) for understanding the emotions that may be associated with change are really helpful to students' understanding. Teachers can use the diagram in conjunction with:

- exploration of scenario cards
- drawing storyboards
- roleplay
- writing responses from 'agony aunt' or problem pages.

A common response to indications of students in Year 7 experiencing difficulties with transition is to urge that their experience becomes more like their experience of Year 6. Strategies that fit into this category involve:

- exposing them to fewer adults
- giving them long stretches of time with one key teacher
- allowing more time for interactive activities.

Another response is to try to identify in Year 6 those pupils who might find the experience of transition particularly difficult and to provide lots of additional support. This could be equally true for a student of any age who moves to or from a school due to a change in family circumstances, travelling round or to the country or a move of house. It is probable that the same young people who found change difficult when they moved from Year 6 to Year 7 will struggle with moving between teaching sets, tutor groups or key stages. However, it is not enough to identify the

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vulnerable young people and track them. Others may come into the 'vulnerable' category because of changes in life circumstances that have an adverse impact on their emotional resilience and the ability to embrace change positively.

Some schools hold tutor group conferences, when they bring together all the teachers of a particular year group and review each of the tutor groups within that year in turn. Students with specific needs or changes in behaviour, and so on, are highlighted and discussed. Teaching staff who have particular success with a student will share the strategies that they use and help colleagues who are finding an individual more challenging. Teachers and tutors can also ask the students in their tutor group or class about their responses to change, highlight changes that have been negotiated successfully, pool helpful coping strategies from the group and plan for the next transition as a whole-tutor set.

## Different responses

Many factors influence how young people – and the rest of us – respond to changes in our lives. Generally speaking, we can endure the uncertainty provoked by transition if we also have some degree of stability on which to rely. For example, the student who does not have a secure home life is likely to find it more difficult than someone who does have this security to lose a relationship with a teacher they admire or a friend on whom they rely for support.

One of the reasons why friendship groups come to be so highly valued – and difficult for schools to handle – is because peer relationships are often quite weak. People move around in closed friendship groups because they feel insecure in close proximity to those whom they do not know so well.

## Activities that create a sense of community

- Ice-breaking and getting-to-know-you activities, such as alliterative name games: 'I am majestic Marilyn'; this can be developed to 'I am majestic Marilyn and I like marzipan' or adding an action.
- Cooperative tasks such as working in a group of four or five and finding as many things as possible that members of the group have in common, for example, 'we all love chocolate'; 'two of us like hip-hop and three do not' and so on.
- Cooperative circle games such as 'wink murder' or 'who changed the action?' where one person is selected to be the detective and goes out of the room. The rest of the group chooses someone who will change the action, or murder members of the group by winking at them. When the detective comes back in, the group works together to make it difficult for the detective to solve the mystery and find out who is the murderer or leader.
- Collaborative problem-solving activities such as 'points of contact' where the teacher calls out a number and the students have to work in groups of four or five to make that number of contacts with the ground in their group. Numbers above 15 involve careful planning to use selected fingers or knees rather than just hands and feet. Once the class has understood the game, get them to play it in silence or ask them to swap the group leader.

It may be useful to think in terms of the types of responses to change. These are explored in the box on page 23.

### Helping students negotiate transition

There are three key elements in any strategy for strengthening students' capacity to negotiate transition and become better learners as a result. These are outlined in the box at the top of page 24. The following are among the strategies we have found useful in achieving those objectives.

### Building a community of learners

Putting 20–30 students together in a room and calling a register does not create a supportive classroom community. Adults have to provide the activities and set the ethos that enable students to connect with each other. Otherwise, it is possible for students to be in the same tutor group together throughout their secondary career and not to know anything about one another beyond the name that is called for registration.

If we do not know people, we will not risk being shown up in front of them and will be very careful about the learning challenges that we engage in. We will 'play safe' so that we can protect our self-image and self-esteem. This protection of the self is a natural response to being in an unfamiliar, unknown or unpredictable situation.

Young people will only feel safe enough to let down their guard and begin to trust when teachers, tutors and other adults in schools facilitate group-forming and team-building. Trust is the foundation stone of risk and learning is all about taking risks. These type of activities need to be put in place whenever a new group is formed. This includes new sets, changes of year, key stage transitions and whenever anyone either leaves or joins the group. Some activities that create a sense of community are shown in the box at the bottom of page 24.

### Open conversations

We need to ensure that students have time to take part in open, non-judgemental conversations as part of their curriculum. In many primary schools, this is timetabled as 'circle time' or 'R time' (for relationships). In secondary schools, there is tutor time or PSHE time. It is important that these timetable slots are well used, and do not become either unproductive, unfocused 'down-time', or another occasion for transmitting content. If the conversation is to be open, teachers need to be sure they are not seen to be imparting the 'party line' on drugs, drink or sex.

The adult facilitates an open conversation by their own openness to different views and opinions and by setting good groundrules for the ways in which students must talk to each other. However, groundrules only work if the teacher ensures they are kept alive. Students quickly abuse the rules if the teacher breaks them or does not enforce them. They should be constantly on display during the relevant lessons and often revisited to see if any rules should be added, amended, redefined or taken off the list.

### Focus on feelings

Focused class-based conversations about the changes coming up are helped by the use of

## Creating emotional safety when meeting with a student (4)

### The physical environment

- Provide a warm, airy space with reasonable décor
- Look at the relative size and comfort of the chairs so that both adult and student are on an equal footing in the conversation
- Ensure the meeting cannot be overheard but is not physically hidden away and inaccessible
- Provide refreshments

### The emotional environment

- Be welcoming
- Be open to information
- Give non-judgemental responses
- Be interested, not intrusive or prying
- Avoid put-downs, even as a joke
- Be careful to avoid 'throw-away' lines and messages
- Take the students' point of view very seriously
- Listen carefully
- Remain curious about the students' perspective
- Refrain from giving advice
- Be comfortable with silence
- Do not talk too much
- Do not give your opinion or use anecdotes

When adults pay attention to the physical and emotional environment, the student begins to feel emotionally comfortable and to let down their defensive guard. This is the prerequisite for establishing the psychological connection essential to good relationships.

metaphors to explore feelings. Sometimes teachers think that students are comfortable with the transition from primary to secondary school because they have been on a visit to the school, met their Year 7 form tutors and talked about uniform, homework, rules and geography. The reality can be very different. A circle exercise that uses black clouds to express concerns about the new school may uncover all types of emotional issues, such as fear of bullying, anxiety about apocryphal stories told by older siblings, concerns about teachers, getting lost and so on. Such feelings will not be aired until they are made a specific focus of attention. Once they are uncovered, the class can begin to use their imagination and draw on the challenge seekers and reflectors (see the box on page 23) in their midst to generate coping strategies.

### Buddying

Buddies are usually older students who offer to support young people who are finding it difficult to cope. Students who join a class part way through the year, due to moving home, a change in family circumstances or flight from a difficult situation, benefit from having a buddy who can induct them into the school, do things with them and show them around. However, buddies do need training and ongoing support if the system is to be sustainable. When young people are used to support younger peers through times of transition and change, they need to understand the range of emotional responses they might encounter.

Training for buddies is most effective when it

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includes a first-hand, experiential exploration of the individual's response to transitions and change in their own life. If the student is asked to share this with one other person, they begin to see that others do not necessarily respond in the same way. Sharing and collating the emotional responses of the group enables the buddies to see that their experiences mirror those presented in conceptual models of emotional responses to change. With this information, the buddies can begin to listen more empathically and effectively to other people's experience. In the most successful buddy schemes, the buddies are also taught listening skills and provided with some back-up for their own emotional responses to the things they hear. Schools often have a referral system so that buddies can refer on to a school counsellor or a member of staff responsible for pastoral care and child protection, and they can obtain support for themselves.

### Additional adult support

Learning mentors and learning support staff can help to ease transitions for fragile students. They can provide additional, focused support, including visiting the home, hosting small support-group sessions and bridging the transition by being seen in both schools involved. Some learning mentors have started transition work in Year 5 for a Year 6 transfer to Year 7. They then take the Year 7 students back to the primary school to talk about their experiences in school assemblies.

Some schools have timetabled one-to-one time for tutors to speak to each of their tutees on a rolling programme. This is a routine that can be used very effectively to support the additional demands of

transitions and these meetings are most effective when the adult establishes a climate of emotional safety in which the student can talk more freely than in the more formal classroom setting. Emotional safety is created by attention to the points outlined in the box on page 25.

### Endings

Schools often pay attention to beginnings, but are less careful with endings. We mark the major transitions from Year 6 to 7 or school leaving at Year 11 with parties, proms, balls, special assemblies and other ceremonies. However, we often fail to notice the smaller endings, such as a student moving house and going to another school, a Forces pupil being posted to a new base or students moving sets. Beginnings and endings need sensitive handling, as the student may not want to be the centre of attention. On the other hand, when they leave, their friends will be sad and the group will have a new dynamic in their absence. Some teachers and tutors ensure that, when a student leaves, (even to go to another group in the same year) the transition is marked by some special event or ceremony.

Transitions can be marked by:

- individual letters or cards to say goodbye
- tutor group certificates of transfer, signed by everyone
- photographs that enable the student to take the old group with them into the new situation
- a lunchtime or breaktime farewell party.

### Partnership with parents and carers

Engaging parents is important in key childhood transitions. This is easier in the routine transitions

### Tips for managers

- Use a survey tool such as Antidote's School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS) to find out how students experience the emotional environment of their class or school.
- Pay particular attention to what is going on for the students in their day-to-day school experience and in times of transition.
- Work out the best strategy for your school to provide routine support by:
  - creating emotional and physical safety (for example, agreeing a common set of core values for the school community, asking the students if there are any unsafe 'hot spots' in the school and dealing with them, and having effective rules or codes of conduct)
  - making sure each student feels valued and important (noticing them individually each day and providing as much recognition as possible to the contribution they make, whether or not it contributes in a positive way to the school's position in the league tables)
  - ensuring that students are listened to (provide listening systems in the school, such as suggestion boxes, email access, student surveys, school and form councils, circle time and so on)
  - ensuring all students are included and no sub-section of the school community is left out of routine support.
- Work with all adults in the school by having anonymous ways to canvas perceptions and views of the emotional environment (for example, SEELS). Use the survey results to inform open conversations that lead to strategies about how to make the situation even better. This will ensure that adult emotional health and wellbeing is supported so that they, in turn, can support students in transition.
- Identify your most fragile students in relation to change and look for the challenge seeker or reflector types (as characterised in the box on page 23) to help them.
- Provide as much structured support as possible for students engaged in transition (such as attention to beginnings and endings, getting to know the new group, making connections across the natural friendship groups, visits to the new situation, and buddies).
- Create additional support structures (such as buddies, counselling, peer mentoring, peer listening and one-to-one teacher/tutor time) for times of significant change.
- Think about the accessibility of your support materials and experiences for foreign national or illiterate parents, students with special needs and so on.
- Keep parents and carers as involved as possible in all transition events, experiences and information.

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presented by school life than when transitions happen unexpectedly. In the latter case, the parents may be undergoing exactly the same feelings and responses as their children, so they may not be in a good state to work with the school in supporting their child. They may need support themselves.

However, communication with parents and carers is always important at times of transition. The more the school can keep the adults informed, the better they are able to add their support to that of the school. For more advice on how to engage parents in the transition process, see the article on pages 34–36.

### **Being emotionally skilled**

It has been said that change is the only truly constant feature of life. If this is so, we need to equip our young people to deal with it effectively. This involves using the experiences of school to provide them with skills and attributes that will foster flexibility and resilience throughout life. Even minor transitions provoke a range of emotional responses. People respond differently. Each individual's ability to gain positive benefits from a new situation is largely dependent on their ability to recognise and manage their own unique emotional responses.

Our emotional responses, and particularly our sense of connection in relationships, affect whether we engage or withdraw from any situation in which we find ourselves. When students engage with other people in the learning environment, they find learning much easier and more enjoyable. That the data shows such a sharp decline in the sense of connectivity with both adults and peers between the ages of 8 and 16 is a matter of considerable concern. On the other hand, when adults and young people are provided with the opportunity to engage in an

open conversation about their emotional experiences in school, they are able to explain what is going on in an articulate and helpful way. This information can then become the foundation of creative thinking about strategies for making learning even better for everyone.

The box on page 26 has tips for managers on how to implement a strategy for emotional literacy.

The strategies presented in this article are based on case-study material from schools that have taken responsibility for thinking about the emotional environment and its impact on learning. Many of the approaches are implemented in order to support people as they undergo experiences of transition and change. All of them foster greater awareness and skills in emotional literacy, enabling people to feel more capable in their study and work, more listened to, with a valuable and worthwhile point of view, more accepted as people who have a unique contribution to make, safer in the physical and emotional environment of the school and more included. These are skills and attributes that are certainly important in enabling people to get the best out of school, and will also stand them in good stead in the many changes and challenges of life in the wider world.

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**James Park, Director, Antidote, and Marilyn Tew, Development Director**

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Antidote works with schools to help shape an emotional environment that enables everyone to learn and grow. Find out more at: [www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk) or contact the authors via email at: [emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk](mailto:emotional.literacy@antidote.org.uk) or telephone: 020 72473355

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**Training for buddies is most effective when it includes a first-hand, experiential exploration of the individual's response to transitions and change in their own life**