

Aspects of Flexi Practice

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Using the four principles: Fostering relational dispositions

This paper explores educator perceptions of their work with young people, drawn from a research project conducted within Flexi schools. Data were drawn from a questionnaire (30 respondents), interviews with staff in the network of flexi schools (16) and written evaluations from a series of Reflective Practice groups. The paper continues to explore using the four principles with an emphasis on developing relationships. Being part of a community of practice and learning through social participation is explored through the idea of relational dispositions or personal and interpersonal capacities. These are developed by educators and mature over time in a gradual way, influenced by a particular Flexi context.

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Being able to embody the principles

When staff talked about the principles as “a living breathing” entity they were describing the embodiment of the principles. Embodying the principles included being authentic in living the principles and being a role model for young people. One educator felt that embodying the principles was like “being a beacon to young people” in terms of role-modeling how to live by those values. When educators applied the same values to themselves that were used with young people, the principles were made more real and tangible. When talking about the ways young people “learn more from what we do - not from what we say”, one educator felt a responsibility to hold himself accountable to the community through the principles.

***Young people learn more from what we do
- not from what we say.***

A number of educators highlighted that the principles were for everybody, not just for the young people. This sense of collective responsibility linked the four principles back into a notion of a real community of people – not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality. Embracing the principles in the whole of life was a way of embodying “the key principles that we live on a day to day basis as humans”, such as respecting one another and respecting yourself. Being respectful was identified as a central value within the flexi schools.

It was evident to a number of educators that young people could clearly “identify someone who acts on the principles” in all aspects of life. When another educator talked about the principles he recognised that his own enacting and embodiment of the principles was an encouragement and model for young people and colleagues. It meant being willing to take risks and have a go, especially in terms of participation and honesty.

Some staff recognised the value of the principles as a foundation for everything and while it was appreciated that it was hard to “genuinely internalise them”, it was perceived as essential in this work. Embodying the principles included learning to resolve conflict nonviolently and to recognise democracy and equity in how they were used. This sense of democracy was expressed in terms of genuinely listening to young people and ensuring that “everyone having a say” was a lived reality within the flexi school community.



Being respectful

Many staff members talked about being respectful, which included being respectful of self, respectful of one another and being respectful of the circumstances in young people's lives. It involved "respecting the dignity of each person" and ensuring that the basis of all relationships was respect.

Respect was seen as an important focus in the work with young people as it was the starting point and launching pad for enacting other principles. When coupled with kindness and an appreciation that everyone had experienced something in their lives that had not worked for them, respect made sense to young people.

The disposition of being respectful towards young people supported staff to work with young people in a way that was not reliant on managing behaviour or using strategies to control the group in a dominating way. Being respectful was not just being "nice" and "weak" it was about "being firm and caring". Another educator saw the importance of being respectful of the circumstances in young people's lives and extending towards them a sense of unconditional love. For one staff member, being respectful was associated "treating people with the same respect that you want to be treated with yourself". Enacting respect demonstrated a capacity or disposition to engage with others, thus enabling enhanced action in and on the immediate social context for a particular purpose (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004), such as creating a safe relational space to support the learning of young people who have experienced social exclusion.

For another educator, the building of relationships through being respectful was the starting point for experiencing trust in staff relationships. One staff member described her experience of being respected by her peers in the learning community as an example of the respect commonly extended to the young people. She felt that such a disposition of respect enacted by her peers and colleagues enabled her to be fully herself.

Being safe

Safety was understood holistically in terms of being emotionally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually safe and this kind of safety was described as the essence of the flexi school communities. This level of safety was important for everyone, both young people and staff. Being safe was also linked to the freedom to have a voice, to say your own piece and "to be safe to express yourself in the way you want to express yourself". Being safe was identified as a basic human need. When discussing the disposition of safety, educators talked about being safe enough to be able to take a risk – have a go, in the same way that they were hoping young people would feel safe to have a go and participate. Being safe was associated with being legal, because your actions affect everyone in some way.

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Being honest

Staff talked about being honest in terms of the capacity to be honest about "not knowing everything" and being honest with sharing personal stories and "being true to yourself". Being honest also required being proactive in taking steps to become informed, to learn from others and be willing to be mentored. This kind of honesty required trust and developing positive relationships over time – developing a disposition of being open.



Being open

Being open was frequently mentioned in terms of being open to admit mistakes, being open and honest if things were not working, and being willing to make amends through apologising when necessary. This disposition of openness enabled people to learn from mistakes by being open-minded and open in attitude. The disposition of being open was sustained by acknowledging the need to remain open and willing to seek assistance when you as an educator were uncertain or unsure.

The challenge in staff relationships to being open and honest about struggles, limitations, and needing help or support in the work with young people, was acknowledged by another educator. Building those kinds of honest and supportive relationships amongst colleagues took time. It requires trust and being able to see the potential of sharing stories as a way of opening up to others. Whilst educators would often encourage young people to be open in this way, it was sometimes perceived as more difficult for staff, particularly new staff, to be open with their peers and colleagues about such things as not knowing something or needing help. One educator acknowledged that it may sometimes be challenging for new workers to feel comfortable with this level of honesty and openness as they may not be used to having the freedom to openly admit their struggles in a workplace for fear of being judged or perceived as incompetent. For those adults who were able to adopt dispositions of openness within a supportive team environment, the experience of becoming more capable over time, through support and mentoring from other staff, was not uncommon.

When talking about adult to adult relationships in the workplace, another educator stated that they wanted to “be someone that was approachable, open, understands, sits down, talks the same language” with colleagues. These dispositions or relational capacities to engage with others, were perceived to be just as important between co-workers as they were with young people. Being open in these ways were valued by staff who prioritised relationships with all people in the learning community.

Another educator talked about being available and open to learn from listening, and to learn from young people and their families and “what they’re looking for”. Being able to listen to young people was an expression of being open to learn from the young people rather than only being in the position of ‘expert’ and this was challenging at times for some staff. Traditional discourses of teacher identity that



conjured notions of authority and needing to be the expert (Alsup, 2006; Britzman, 2003), were frequently contested in this context when educators adopted the disposition of becoming a co-learner with young people.

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In discussing relationships with young people, another person mentioned staff responsibility to make some sort of helpful relationship with young people which required being open “by being a little bit vulnerable”. This disposition of openness required a sensitivity to where young people were coming from “and what they’ve got to offer as well”. Such dispositions of being open-minded with young people and being open in attitude were further examples of dispositions that supported relational ways of working with young people. Additionally, staff made reference to being open and honest with their feelings and being able to discuss emotional upsets safely and appropriately. This kind of openness was an expression of being open to caring for others and demonstrated an appreciation of the level of emotional intelligence that could be fostered through focusing on relationships first. Such an emphasis highlighted an extremely important interpersonal disposition – being able to recognize the primary importance of relationships.



References

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