Project Overview

Summary of Vision and Goals

Relational Schools seeks to influence education policy, leadership and organisational practice with a relational agenda. Set up in January 2014 to address a critical social issue, Relational Schools carried out a pilot programme of rigorous research in UK schools, amassing evidence that clearly suggests:

- that what was generally regarded as social, cultural, economic and technological progress in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has led to a decline in interpersonal relational capability (in our ability to relate well to other people) at a time when society is increasingly fragmented; and
- that schools are both a space in which that decline is visible, and a site for corrective action to be taken, with short and long-term impact.
- In addition, evidence from our own data, and academic review, demonstrates that a focus in schools on relational practice can develop important relational capabilities in teachers and young people, enhancing their understanding of the importance of relationships, decreasing the incidence of bullying, increasing personal wellbeing, improving academic performance and preparing students to be productive employees and engaged citizens.
- The evidence clearly shows both the importance of effective relationships in better educational outcomes, and the fact that relational capability can be learned.

With compelling proof of concept, Relational Schools is now looking to develop a wider programme of research, working with universities and independent research groups to harness the evidence from smaller, matched comparison studies and expand the research over hundreds of schools and hundreds of thousands of children and teachers. The next phase of this research is intended to provide evidence as to whether our approach is effective when scaled to serve this large number of schools and, in addition, to transfer the knowledge from the UK to parallel projects in other host countries. We wish to influence policy and practice through engaging with policy-makers and thought-leaders in target international school systems.

Context and Purpose

In most education systems around the world, there is much healthy debate about how to raise academic standards, and how to improve the quality of teaching and learning in a time of austerity. In many systems, there are concurrent debates about whether schools should focus on developing the skills and competencies that young people will need for life and work in the 21st century.

Occasionally, these debates are framed in a discussion about the role schools play in their social context. Very rarely, however, do the debates consider schools as a site for the *creation* of society; as a place where children first experience the values and norms which, in their future social settings, will enable human flourishing and cultural harmony.

It is precisely this sort of consideration that we wish to encourage through Relational Schools. This is related to a clear mission:

- That in order for societies to adapt to shifting global trends whilst maintaining the values they need to ensure social cohesion, we need to develop in our young people the skills they will need to relate to one another, and to people with very different cultural backgrounds and social interests.

- By helping children maintain and develop deep and engaging relationships with friends and family, for example, we will help them negotiate the challenges presented by modern technologies which, in seeking to broaden the range of our social networks, creating wider and more frequent connection, often make our relationships more shallow and goal oriented.
- By helping children understand the dynamics of relationships, and to learn the benefits of compromise and negotiation, we will address the issues that arise from isolation and individualism, like low self-esteem, self-harm and suicide. Whilst awareness of issues such as bullying is greater today, international figures reveal numbers of children seeking professional support for bullying have doubled in the last decade.
- We also wish to address the issues arising from communities destroyed or displaced by conflict and community composition transformed through mass-migration. By helping children develop the skills and characteristics required for empathy and tolerance, we believe it is possible to help them build the strong foundations needed for our societies to thrive in a more global world for the generations to come.
- By helping teachers reflect differently on educational outcomes, we want to explore their potential to be active agents in promoting peace, reconciliation and social cohesion.

Progress to Date

The relational vision for education goes beyond a focus on the personal development of the child. Competency in the core subjects of maths, science and language, currently the primary basis for evaluation of schools and students, is important but not sufficient on its own. Children also need to learn how to relate - how to become good parents, good neighbours, good employees, and good citizens. Consequently, the main focus for Relational Schools is on building strong parent-to-school, teacher-to-student, and student-to-student relationships.

Research has already been conducted by Relational Schools in several schools in England sitting in the heart of communities with, in some instances, significant levels of deprivation and yet where many students achieve academic outcomes that surpass those in more advantaged settings. The research included surveys of over 3,000 student-to-student relationships, and a more developed case study approach to teacher-to-student relationships. The results, and the underlying model, were externally validated by a former senior statistician with the NfER[1]. They are striking, and show the potential to improve these relationships through a range of targeted interventions.

To understand the results, it is necessary to understand the underlying model of Relational Proximity[2], which is defined as a measure of the distance in the relationship between two people or organisations and which determines how well each engages with the thinking, emotions and behaviour of the other. Relational Proximity is defined in terms of five main domains in the underlying relationship. These domains are: **communication**, **time**, **knowledge**, **power** and **purpose**, which are a part of every relationship, whether inter-personal or inter-organisational. To achieve Relational Proximity, in this model, requires that appropriately high levels of the five 'drivers' of Relational Proximity are present. Each has a number of components or sub-drivers. These, and their outcomes, are shown in the table overleaf.

The starting point is an empirical analysis of the prioritised relationship. The framework generates an empirical score of the Relational health of an organisation and provides the basis for evaluation and interventions. As **both** parties communicate their perceptions of the relationship, it is possible to explore perception gaps and suggest how the relationship can be positively influenced and developed. It also provides an index by which schools can be compared within education systems and internationally.

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[1] National Foundation for Educational Research, the UK's largest independent provider of research and assessment
[2] Relational Proximity® was developed by Relational Research, Cambridge, and is now licensed worldwide by Relational Analytics Ltd.

The Benefits of Relational Proximity

| DOMAINS of Relational Proximity	DRIVERS of Relational Proximity	FEATURE of relationship	EXPERIENCE in relationships	OUTCOME for organization
Those of…	Greater…	creates…	encouraging…	and producing…
Communication	Directness	encounter	connectedness	communication
Time	Continuity	storyline	belonging	momentum
Knowledge	Multiplexity	knowledge	mutual understanding	transparency
Power	Parity	fairness	mutual respect	participation
Purpose	Commonality	alignment	shared identity	synergy

Some of our first findings are presented in visual form in the graph overleaf. The data represents averages taken from a number of different year groups (ages 11-16) within each school and a disaggregation of this data also reveals additional insights; it indicates failings in the structures and processes replicated in many UK Secondary Schools.

In broad terms, this graph demonstrates the following:

1. **Classroom relationships appear consistent irrespective of school type**. When looking at the overall pattern of the data, despite some variability, irrespective of the school the student attends (mixed comprehensive or single gendered); irrespective of the socio-economic context the school; irrespective of the age of the pupils and irrespective of the quality of the school, all students describe their relationships in a strikingly similar way. You will see from the clustering overleaf that we believe we now understand the pattern of classroom relationships in many schools and that pattern is consistent across almost all the elements of the relationship we explore.

2. **That different types of school score at different levels on the Proximity index.** This raises questions about the kinds of organisational structures, systems and processes that leads to a better, more connected, school experience for students. The qualitative component of the research that accompanied the data collection (interviews with staff and students) revealed fundamental distinctions in elements such as class size, or structure of the school day, which seem to be associated with these results; it will require further, and larger-scale studies, to confirm these early conclusions.

3. **Looking carefully at the additional driver and sub-driver data by year group and class, we observe in some schools (represented by the red, blue and green) that the older a student gets, the less likely they are to connect to their peers**. As student moves from Year 7 through to Year 11, we witnessed a decline in relational health particularly around issues of what we call "commonality", that is the shared values and goals we have. The exception is the data taken from a school with an all-through structure (pupils 4-18). All-through learning structures put the child at the heart of the system. In particular, they tend to concentrate on the key transitions to ensure that the gains in learning are built upon year by year with the minimum of disruption as the child moves through the learning structure(s). Academic research shows that these key transitions can have a marked effect on affect pupil progress.

4. **The sub-driver data gives a more nuanced picture and suggests a deterioration in their personal relationships as the student move towards adulthood**. The graph tells us that the students feel their conversation is dysfunctional (they speak often but say nothing). They have little sense of a shared story or narrative (and additional data tells us that this gets much worse as they get older). They see each other every day but don't know each other. They don't feel involved (one might say there is a sense of isolation being expressed and not merely individuation). Worst of all, their sense of long-term fraternity is almost non-existent. They don't see themselves working with, or connecting with, the other students in the future.

Compare this picture of student relationships with data taken from a school where relationships are the driving imperative of structures, systems, processes and pedagogy (purple line).

Four School Comparison: Sub-driver Data
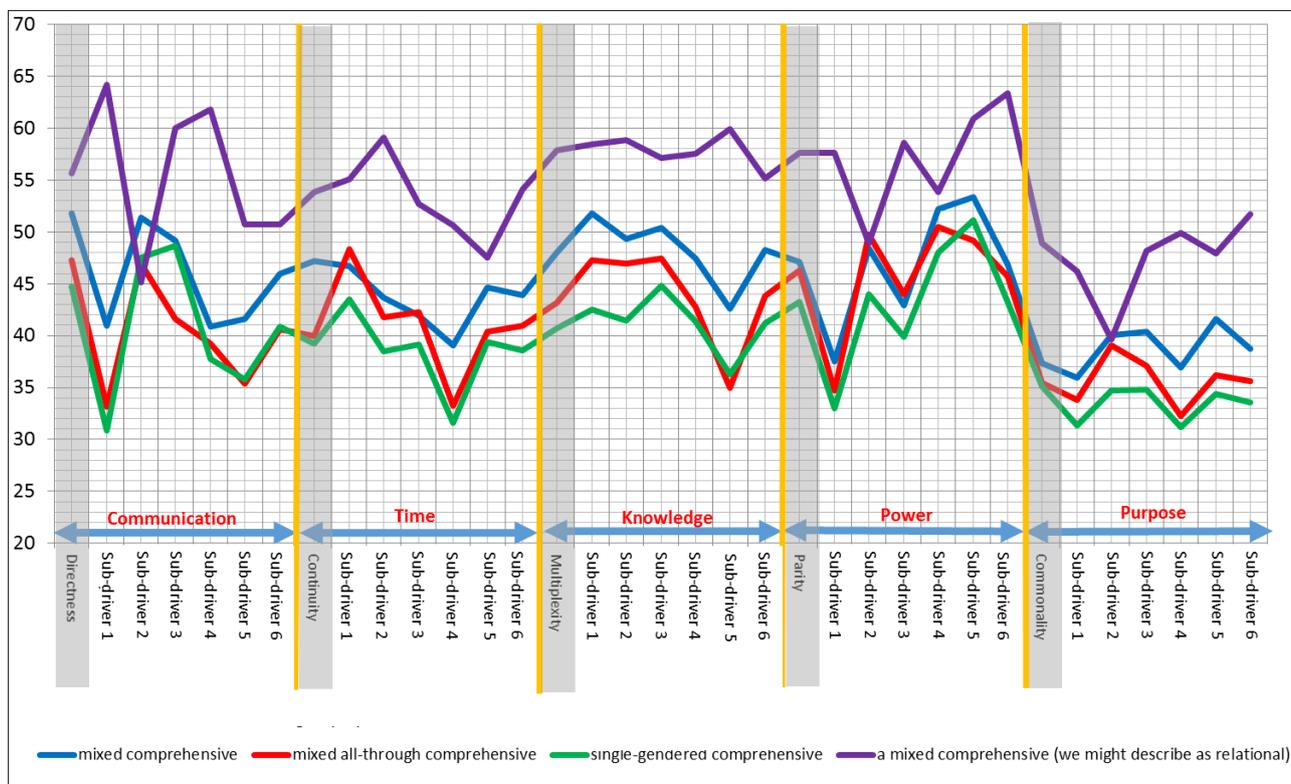
In schools we would classify as 'relational', not only did students achieve superior academic outcomes, they also realised other benefits. Where we observed weaker, more dysfunctional, relationships in other school contexts, our research demonstrates that where a school was intentional about building relationships amongst peers, we found that levels of well-being were higher and bullying levels lower. In one case a school, described as a "family" by students, was considered by social services as the best environment in the region for looked-after children and, in addition, where students achieved some of the strongest academic outcomes relative to their starting points. This is evidence for the impact of relational systems and processes at school level. This is true at the micro-level of the classroom as well.

The Relational Teacher

Having begun to understand the systems and processes of a Relational School (those that stimulate strong, more connected peer group relationships), the natural next step was to concentrate on the teacher to student bond. Evidence already exists to show that students who develop positive relationships with teachers and their peers achieve stronger academic outcomes. Where strong relationships are fostered between teachers and students (in particular), evidence suggests that poor or dysfunctional relationships in the home can be partially compensated for. Where they are poor or dysfunctional, evidence suggests they reinforce educational disadvantage.

To introduce the organisation and its research findings to the education community, Relational Schools commissioned a 50-minute documentary film: The Relational Teacher. The film - and supporting book - reveal the benefits of a relational focus in the teacher-student connection, and the potential to improve dysfunctional relationships through a range of pedagogical approaches. A trailer can be viewed on the project website (www.relationalschools.org/relational-teacher). Following the launch, several leading UK and international universities have suggested conducting joint research projects, whilst a number of education-focused businesses have expressed an interest in both commercial and non-commercial partnerships.