

**CHILDREN'S SCHOOL EXPERIENCE – DEVELOPING A HELPFUL  
RESPONSE**  
**Children in Wales September 20<sup>th</sup> 2007**

**Antidote's work**

The Children's Act in 2002, with its resultant Every Child Matters Agenda has brought momentous changes in Children's Services in England and Wales. At their heart, these changes have a genuine desire to put children at the centre of a range of provision designed to ensure that every child gets the very best opportunity and support in life. Part of that provision is the work carried out in schools.

Children spend from approximately 9 am to 3pm in school. That is 30 hours a week, and over 1000 in a school year. When we think how long it can feel to sit in a dentist's waiting room, over 1000 hours a year is a long time to endure if you feel anxious, afraid, unhappy or unfulfilled. On the other hand, school can provide an oasis of calm in an otherwise chaotic existence or a great sense of purpose when affirming feedback follows each accomplishment.

If we think back to our own school days, we can all recall teachers who made a great impression on us. There were those who made us feel competent, important and valuable for our contribution, talents and presence in their classrooms. These were the ones who smiled at us, who were happy to see us and seasoned their lessons by communicating pleasure at spending time with us. Then there were the ones who made us feel small and incompetent, who ridiculed or patronised us. Both sets of adults had a big impact in our lives. They taught us to love or to loathe them as people and similarly to enjoy or hate their subjects. Schools and the adults who work in them have then, great power to influence young people positively or negatively. They can make the 1000 hours a pleasure or a chore, a joy or a drudge.

Over the past 5 years, Antidote's research team, in partnership with the University of Bristol has created a framework for understanding what facilitates or inhibits engagement with school. These ideas have been turned into an on-line questionnaire called the School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS). Antidote works with schools to help them make teaching and learning as good as it can possibly be. As the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) suggests in its SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) documentation, this kind of work starts by finding out how people really experience the school – what is really going on? Once we have discovered how young people and adults experience life in a particular school, the journey of change and transformation can begin. The SEELS provides baseline information that is the starting place for such change.

To find out more about SEELS and to try out the survey visit [www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk)

**What is SEELS?**

SEELS is an online tool that has been developed to enable staff and students (aged 8 to adult) to say how they experience the relationships, communication and systems of their school. It does this by asking them to respond to a series of questions using a 6-point scale, and to provide comments and observations that further illustrate their responses. The questionnaire is confidential, with no means of tracking back to

individual respondents and the results are presented as an amalgamation of people's views.

The graphs and charts produced by the SEELS protect the anonymity of the individual and present percentage responses, though the data can be divided to look for ways in which different sub-sections of the school community experience school life – such as males and females, by year group, by length of time teaching, by ethnicity etc.

SEELS results provide a framework for people to reflect on:

- what factors block, or potentially encourage, people's capacity to interact in an emotionally literate way – so that they can build an understanding of their own and others' emotions, and use that understanding to shape their actions
- which factors should be explored more deeply to increase the capacity for engagement in school and learning

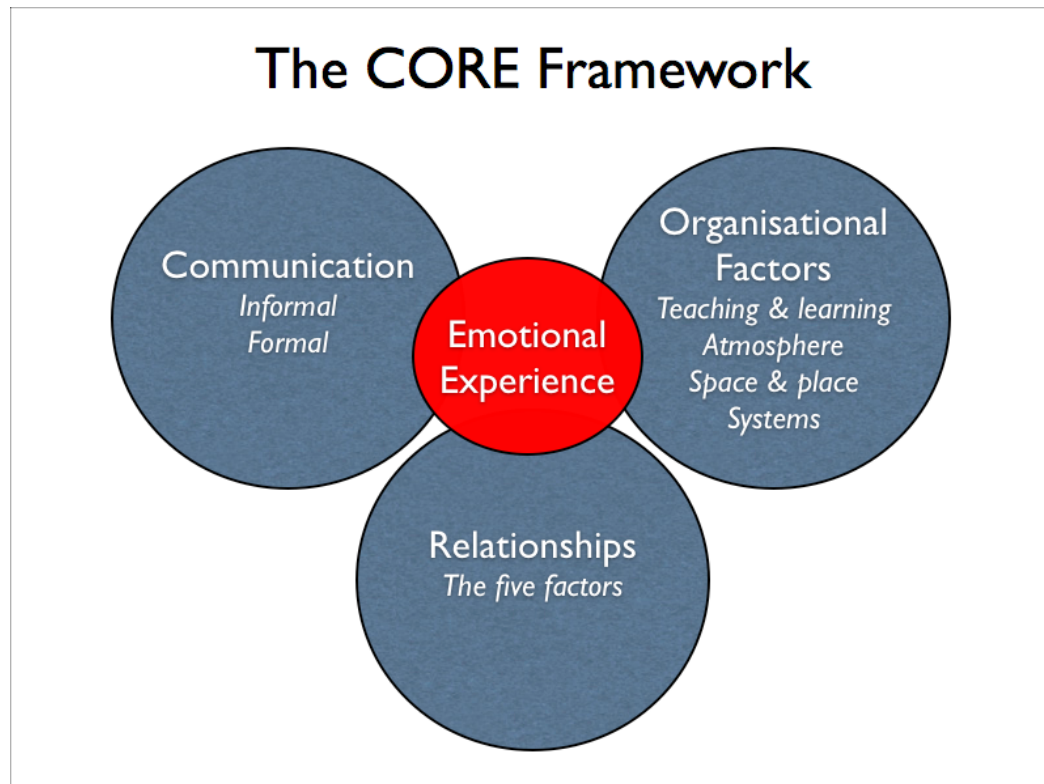
By encouraging people to reflect on what is going on emotionally, SEELS enables the school community to start the process of developing a strategy which both builds on the areas of strength that have been identified and addresses the gaps.

The quantitative data on the emotional environment SEELS provides also enables schools and children's services to monitor what changes have taken place in the school's emotional environment, and to identify ways of improving things yet further.

SEELS also makes it possible to see if there are links between changes in the emotional environment and learning achievement, attendance, behaviour data as a measure of overall well-being.

### **SEELS feedback**

The SEELS provides information in relation to the four areas of Antidote's CORE framework shown below.



Feedback in the form of graphs and charts is provided for each of the **CORE** elements, showing how much the school facilitates people feeling CLASI. That means how strongly the relationships, communication and systems of the school support people in feeling:

**Capable** – people feel that others have a genuine interest in enabling them to realise their potential

**Listened to** – people feel that saying what they think or feel may enable things to change in positive ways

**Accepted** – people feel that they can explore different ways of being themselves rather than simply complying with expectations

**Safe** – people feel there is acknowledgement that they experience emotions which have an impact on how they think, learn and behave

**Included** - people feel that they have a distinctive and valued role within the school community

In addition to the CLASI data for each element of the CORE, the SEELS provides charts showing how people feel in five aspects of their school relationships.

#### **For young people these are:**

Connection to adults in the school

Connection to their peer (other than their close friends)

Connection to friends

The time, space and permission they feel the school provides for emotional experience

The overall sense of emotional safety

**For the adults the five factors of relationships are:**

Strategic support to do my job – the time, opportunities and information I need

Classroom dynamic – teaching and learning feels like a collective endeavour in which the adult feels autonomous and supported

Connection to the wider school community – connected to colleagues and other adults that perhaps are not seen very often

Talking about emotional experiences – it is OK to share my feelings and for other people to share theirs with me

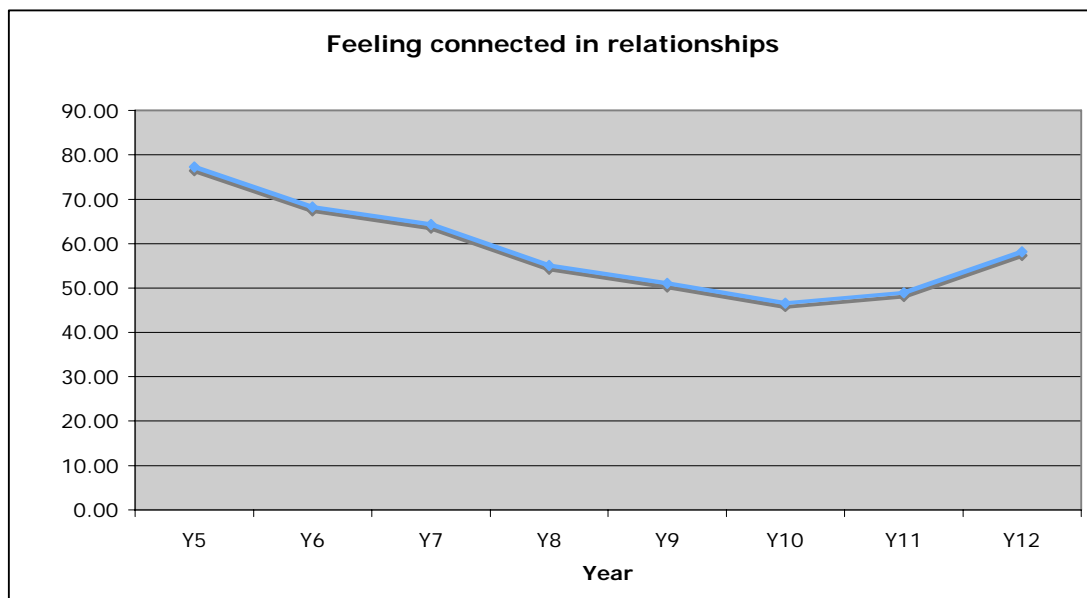
Overall sense of emotional safety

**What children and young people say is going on for them**

Every school has a unique set of results, which can inform an individual journey of change to make things even better. When the results from Antidote’s database are put together, however, we see a picture of what is happening for 8000 young people in successive school years.

The most startling result is that from year 5 to year 10, children and young people feel increasingly disconnected from both adults and peers in the school environment.

There is a 10% increase in the sense of disconnection between years 5 and 6 and another between years 7 and 8. Only when young people move on into year 11 does their sense of connectedness in school relationships increase and even in the sixth form, the connection does not return to the levels experienced in year 5.



When Antidote inquired more deeply into what is going on for young people as they progress through school they report an increasing sense of disconnection from peers other than their friends, which is seen by poor relationships in the times and spaces of the school that lie outside classrooms and away from the direct supervision of adults.

In many schools, children feel unsafe in the spaces and places of the school, only really feeling safe when an adult is directly supervising activities and procedures.

Similarly they reported an increase in disconnection from adults. This is accompanied by increasing disengagement and poor behaviour with increasing age and a commensurate increase in strict and rigid classroom management approaches accompanied by more aloof and distant adult to student relationships.

### **Who should respond?**

In the recent history of British education, so many solutions are someone else's good idea. They are imposed from outside and come in sets of ring-binder files, lunchboxes, CDs, online guidance and DVDs. The temptation is to think there is a prescribed formula that will bring rapid and certain results. Antidote's experience is quite other.

We find that only if you live and work in the school can you really know what is going on and therefore find ways of making it even better. This means that 'quick fix' won't work; there is no easy 'one size fits all' solutions that can be imported or superimposed on a school to make things better. There are certainly good ideas, fresh and innovative approaches, more efficient systems and procedures, which can be learned from other contexts, but each school has to decide on its own priorities and work out strategies unique to the people and context. It is often the very process of being able to winge and moan about the current situation that enables a group of staff to open the collective imagination and come up with solutions.

The SEELS data provides schools with a starting place for a conversation about what is really going on for staff and students. This conversation leads on to strategies for strengthening the things that are going well and improving the things that are causing irritation, dysfunction and inefficiency. Sometimes schools use the SEELS manual and interpret their own data to help them find a way forward. Other schools prefer to invite Antidote to act as facilitators of the change process. If Antidote is involved, we use some or all of a five-staged approach (shown below) to bring about sustainable change.

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TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

### **The difference SEELS work can make**

Change is never either comfortable or easy. Changing the school to enable adults and young people to feel more CLASI is no exception, and is perhaps, even more uncomfortable than most forms of change because it requires individuals and groups to examine attitudes and behaviour.

Sometimes staff have unrealistic or unclear expectations of the pace and scope of change that results from understanding SEELS data. Antidote has found barriers to implementation including:

- thinking the SEELS process would quickly uncover the source of behavioural difficulties and provide a 'cure'
- a reluctance to acknowledge and examine tensions and difficulties in the way different sections of the staff relate to one another
- thinking that the issues revealed by SEELS could be addressed simply by developing students' skills in curriculum time
- not realising how far-reaching and systemic the strategies for change would need to be

The best outcomes from SEELS are seen when the senior team understands and embraces the messiness of the change process. Antidote finds that the process proceeds best when time is spent setting the scene with key people in a school, flagging up just how far-reaching and systemic the outcomes of SEELS can be. Senior staff need to understand that SEELS will probably uncover school policies and systems that are not working for people; relational tensions; and messages from students that may be difficult for staff to hear.

### **Benefits**

SEELS provides a systematic overview of the emotional environment for learning in a school. When it is used to identify starting points and priorities, it seems to make it easier to inspire staff and students to be actively involved in making a difference in their school.

One headteacher said that the SEELS process:

- informed the development of his vision for the school, encapsulated in three big ideas - achieve more, listen more, take care of each other
- stimulated conversations about what was going on
- helped people to realise the need to understand relationships before they understand learning
- helped people to shift from focusing on behaviour to focusing on relationships

He also said 'I'm surprised how supportive the governors have been. They are business people and they say this is exactly what schools should be about - helping young people to be successful'.

Schools develop different strategies as a result of the SEELS data because every school has a different starting point and a unique set of results and issues. However, it is sometimes helpful to hear what kind of strategies and approaches schools have taken as a result of doing the SEELS. Some of them are listed below:

1. Reviewing staff policies, job descriptions, and systems of appraisal

2. Reviewing approaches to building relationships among students in the classroom including circle time and philosophy for children (P4C)<sup>1</sup>
3. Instigating approaches for building relationships among students outside the classroom including student-led mediation, play leaders, a greater repertoire of playground games, playground buddies and a more creative use of outside space
4. Creating more time for staff reflection and joint planning
5. Introducing more interactive and experiential teaching and learning strategies across the age range
6. Focusing on student:adult relationships that support learning including coaching, facilitative approaches to learning and more positive use of the tutor's role
7. Developing an 'in-house' way of talking about the skills and qualities of a good learner
8. Creating opportunities for reflection on the processes of learning to learn
9. Creating opportunities to regularly reflect on student's experience of the emotional and social aspects of learning
10. Creating opportunities for positive interactions student:student, staff:student and staff:parent, including off-timetable and off-site events
11. Focusing on groupwork and the skills of interaction, cooperation, collaboration and joint performance.

### **How to find out more**

Antidote's work is based on 5 years of in-depth research in partnership with the University of Bristol. Primary and secondary schools took part in the research and you can read more about the results on [www.antidote.org.uk](http://www.antidote.org.uk)

*The School Emotional Environment for Learning Survey (SEELS)* is currently being used in 50 primary and secondary schools across the UK. It is available at £175 for a large secondary school and £125 for a small primary, through the website or by telephoning Antidote on 0207 247 3355. Data analysis is supported by an interactive .pdf file available from the website once the survey has been completed.

*Antidote is available to work with your school* to set up the survey, interpret the results or work with groups of staff and students to develop strategies for sustainable changes that make teaching and learning even better for everyone. Different packages are available on request from the Antidote office and are costed on a bespoke basis. For more information email [Richard@antidote.org.uk](mailto:Richard@antidote.org.uk) or phone 0207 247 3355

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sapere.org.uk](http://www.sapere.org.uk)

