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Turning the Tide on 'Coercive Autonomy': learning from the Antidote story

JAMES PARK

ABSTRACT This article argues that the mental health crisis affecting children and young people can only be addressed by putting in place a radically different model of school accountability from the one we have now. It explores what might be learned from the history of Antidote – an organisation set up to foster more emotionally supportive school environments –to inform the development of such a model.

Toxic Accountability

A recent report by researchers at London's Institute of Education (Greany & Higham, 2018) nails the lie that government policy since 2010 has freed English schools from central control to create a 'self-improving' system, where school leaders can draw on diverse sources of wisdom and creativity to establish the most effective ways of enabling children and young people to learn, grow and achieve. 'Any increase in operational autonomy for schools,' declare authors Toby Greany and Rob Higham, 'is more than balanced out by changes to the accountability framework which have allowed the state to continue to steer the system from a distance and to increasingly intervene and coerce where it deems necessary.'

The negative consequences identified in the report will surprise few who have any experience of the English accountability system. These include the pressure on some leaders to prioritise the interests of their schools over those of the children being educated within them; the constraints on teachers' capacity to use their professional judgement in responding to students' needs and interests; the high levels of stress experienced by leaders and teachers as they look for ways to boost test scores and get their schools through inspections; the way the system can make it difficult for schools to offer 'a broad and balanced

curriculum'; the adoption of practices designed to 'cream skim' particular types of students, leading to the emergence of winners and losers, as disadvantaged, migrant and hard-to-place children are shunted into low-performing schools.

Greany and Higham do not explore the impact all this might be having upon young people's capacity to thrive, but their argument raises questions such as: How does it affect some students' sense of self to be learning in schools where so much importance is attached to individual test results and the aggregated results for their schools? To what extent are the anxieties of leaders and teachers picked up by the young people in their charge, and what impact might this have upon the course of their lives? How often is a student's self-confidence damaged when his or her school is judged to be 'inadequate', the head teacher scuttled out of the door, the school designated for closure?

Without answers to these questions – and obviously different children are affected in different ways – we also cannot establish how strong the links might be between the anxiety and competitive stress fostered by the system and the rising levels of emotional distress reported by young people. Many believe that the pressures created by social media – which lead to people constantly being compared with others and judged by them – are the biggest reason for the increase in the numbers of young people who experience depression, anxiety and the urge to self-harm. It is surely reasonable to propose that a school accountability system which applies similar pressures must be another part of the explanation. Which means we either have to accept the mental health crisis as collateral damage from actions taken to improve our schools, or evolve a different model.

Emotional Literacy

These questions are particularly poignant for me because some two decades ago I helped set up an organisation called Antidote that sought to put the emotional development of children and young people at the centre of the school reform agenda. Our declared aim was to make 'the capacity to handle the complexities of our emotional lives as commonplace as the ability to read, write and do arithmetic'. And we came to realise that the most powerful way to achieve this was by enabling schools to drive improvement from below, through giving children, young people and their teachers real opportunities to shape what they learned, how they learned and how their schools were run. The multi-perspectival accountability model (Park, 2013) that evolved from this thinking – built as it was around an all-inclusive democratic conversation – was about as far away as could be imagined from the system that Greany and Higham (2018) dub 'coercive autonomy'. How different things might look now if our impact had gone deeper and been more lasting!

This article is about what, if anything, can be learned from the Antidote story that might be useful for those setting out now to engineer a shift towards a healthier school system, one that I argue needs to take a genuine interest in the opinions and experiences of leaders, staff, students and parents.

As it happens, our initial focus was on curriculum and pedagogy – in part because a conversation was going on about how the National Curriculum could incorporate citizenship and moral education alongside wider definitions of personal, social and health education. We argued that emotional understanding was a driver of cognitive learning, and that you could enhance motivation to learn, and depth of learning, by developing pedagogies that enabled children and young people to explore their emotional experiences – how they understood their intuitive responses to things, how they built their relationships to others – while they were making discoveries about the world. This might happen while they were reflecting on the content of what was being studied – thinking about what made *them* feel powerful while learning about a historical leader; reflecting on the ebb and flow of their own relationships while reading a romantic novel; and so on – or by sharing through dialogue their varying emotional responses to a scientific experiment, a mathematical problem, a piece of knowledge. We wanted to find powerful ways of enabling young people to find in what they were learning what was relevant to their own lives, and so strengthen their motivation to learn. We were concerned to ensure that the core of the curriculum could be accessed by all young people, and were definitively not putting forward emotional learning for consideration as a discrete subject.

As we developed our argument, we came to realise the importance of school culture, and the processes that shaped it, to what we were trying to achieve. We saw that young people's capacity to be reflective, understand what was going on for them, and think about how to change their patterns of relating to others was powerfully affected by the emotional environment of their schools; by whether they felt that the adults around them wanted them to do well, showed an interest in their opinions, and valued them as contributors to the school community; and by whether they felt safe, and able to voice their views without fear of being shamed. We developed an acronym, CLASI – Capable, Listened to, Accepted, Safe and Included – to describe the sort of school culture we thought contributed to developing emotionally powerful people. And we realised that the way to make schools more CLASI was to find out from everyone in the school community what was really going on, and what ideas they had about how to make it even better.

As we implemented these ideas, we started to see how young people's self-knowledge and sense of self could grow through having the power to speak – hearing their voice reflected back by others who saw things differently, engaging in dialogue with those others to find ways forward that worked for everybody. And how experiencing themselves as participants in a process that led to organisational change helped remove the blocks to them making personal changes in how they saw themselves and organised their lives. Over time, we came to recognise that the democratising processes we were arguing for could lead to shifts in pedagogy, but that the sort of changes in pedagogy we thought necessary were unlikely to come about in a culture that did not embrace stakeholder voice.

Joining the Education Argument

Most of us involved in setting up Antidote came from outside education. We were writers, management consultants, psychotherapists, sociologists and doctors as well as teachers and head teachers, initially as interested in challenging the Treasury to think about the emotional consequences of its financial instruments and in working out how to enrol people in taking responsibility for addressing climate change as we were in influencing school reform. We wanted to achieve a more emotionally literate society, and saw education policy as one element in our strategy for achieving that. But the phone calls we received from teachers and parents – articulating their anxiety about the impact of the 'standards' agenda on children and young people – persuaded us that schools should – at least for a while – be our primary focus.

We thought it a strength that our perspectives were informed as much by psychotherapy, sociology and management consultancy as by debates within education. A less positive consequence was that we were not as well prepared as we might have been to respond to educationalists who were sceptical of our argument, and we were even surprised when journalists talked about our project as being an attempt to revive 'progressive' educational ideas. We had thought that we were cutting a way through any binary division between learner-centred and 'traditional' approaches. Surely people could see how deep our concern was that children acquire knowledge? We just didn't think that it really worked trying to 'transmit' information to people who were not emotionally prepared to receive it. And we really were not arguing for a focus on emotion over cognition – rather, that the two needed to work together, to the benefit of both.

If we had recognised from the start how difficult it would be to escape the charge that we were against academic learning and intellectual rigor, we might have thought more carefully about the friends we mixed with and the alliances we forged. We knew that, as a tiny organisation seeking to achieve big things, we had to work with others. The obvious people to work with were those who, like us, were arguing for the importance of attending to children's emotional development. We found ourselves collaborating with people who delivered counselling in schools, practised restorative justice and circle time, provided home-school support, ran nurture groups and organised after-school clubs where children developed group skills. We would get together for stimulating weekends where we would share knowledge, develop position papers and organise seminars to promulgate the shared elements of our agenda. Looking back, I find it perplexing that so few of the people we talked with at this stage were focused on the core of the curriculum and academic learning.

Riding a Wave

But we were buoyed up by the sense that we were riding the Zeitgeist. Setting out our stall as the New Labour drum started to roll meant we could exploit the interest of politicians in finding new ways to engage the disengaged and build a

healthy society. We were able to feed our viewpoint into the discussions that took place in the various committees that shaped (or at least tried to) the government's approach to personal, social, health and citizenship education. And the fact that we had found our voice in these fora eased open the doors to funders who were interested in backing the action research project we wanted to set up. It was an exciting time. But looking back, I wonder how things might have turned out if we had differentiated our argument more clearly from those of organisations that offered discrete interventions designed to help individuals or groups resolve their emotional difficulties. If we had occupied our own ground more firmly, could we have built a stronger base of support? Or might we just have just faded away for lack of interest? At this distance in time, it is impossible to say.

Over time, the funding we garnered from charitable trusts enabled us to develop our core argument by working collaboratively with staff and students at interested primary and secondary schools. We developed an online diagnostic that gave staff, students and parents the opportunity to provide an honest and open account of how the school's culture affected their capacity to learn, grow and achieve. And we evolved a process for using this data to inform reflective conversations across the school community that shape a strategy for change. We looked at how processes like Philosophy for Children (P4C) could enrich learning by strengthening emotional-cognitive links, and developed tailored approaches for working with particular class groups. We knew we were getting somewhere when, at the end of the second year, the head teacher of one primary school reported that 'Antidote started the staff talking as a group and imperceptibly the emotional climate in the school began to change. People were coming to me saying, "We have a problem here but we've thought of a couple of solutions that might work." Before they used to say, "We have a problem here. We'll leave it with you."'

We became increasingly convinced that we had found a way of getting the whole school community positively engaged in leading a process of school change – an economical, light-touch, life-enhancing process that was very different from the costly, coercive, wasteful system associated with the school accountability system built around Ofsted inspections.

Our timing was lucky. In 2002, when the Department for Education and Skills commissioned Katharine Weare and Gay Gray to prepare a report on 'what works in promoting social and emotional competence' (Weare & Gray, 2003), we could argue strongly for an approach that embraced the whole school community, rather than being purely focused on putting emotion lessons into the curriculum. 'There is strong evidence to suggest,' wrote Weare and Gray, 'that the school environment is the largest determinant of the level of emotional and social competence and wellbeing in pupils and teachers.' This was music to our ears. We had an offer for schools that was built around our online diagnostic and called the PROGRESS Programme. So with the arrival of designated funding for schools to buy in work on what came to be called the

Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, we were ready to roll this out across the country.

Changing School Cultures

We went on to implement PROGRESS in schools around the UK – from tiny primaries in rural areas to mammoth secondaries in inner cities, sometimes working with clusters of schools, sometimes though local authorities, at other times just with an individual school that was interested in what we had to offer. As we did so, we learned to navigate our way through the multiple layers of scepticism we encountered: school leaders who doubted that anything useful would come from inviting staff and students to be completely open about their experience of school; staff and students who did not believe we could guarantee that it was safe to articulate what they *really* felt, and could not believe that doing so might lead to change. Our job was to keep the conversation going long enough for people to see that profound shifts could come about as a result of a school's stakeholders exploring what was really going on: becoming in the process more able to address taboo topics, understand each other and relate differently. By enhancing 'reflective capacity' – a term I came over time to prefer to 'emotional literacy' – we helped individuals and organisations become less stuck, less trapped in the headlights of the standards agenda, with small changes building cumulatively upon each other to shape the possibility of lasting transformation.

The shifts in culture and atmosphere we saw taking place were sometimes profound, and we began to gather the first smidgens of evidence to suggest that bringing about these sorts of changes could also boost test scores. We worked, for example, at a primary school in an area of high economic deprivation to the west of London, with a very mobile student population – all factors that made it difficult getting SATS scores up to the expected norms. As we worked with staff and students to explore the pressure they were under, and the impact this had on teaching and learning, they started to recognise that the 'fix-it' solutions they had been adopting to improve results were getting in the way of developing longer-term strategies that would enable children to truly grow, learn and develop. They were reluctantly embracing teaching and learning techniques that they did not enjoy delivering or ultimately believe in. This in turn increased stress and unhappiness. Staff sickness was high, leading to disrupted relationships between teachers and children. Many children found these disruptions hard to tolerate; it dented their confidence and provoked challenging behaviour.

As these findings were brought to the surface, staff and students began to talk together about better ways of learning. Teachers thought about how to make lessons interesting, and resolved to focus on creating learning experiences that would get students more engaged. Feeling more efficacious themselves, they found that this boosted children's confidence and capacity. The irony was that these 'longer-term' approaches to raising achievement brought about a

rapid improvement in SATS results. Just nine months after we had first been introduced to the school, the number of children achieving Level 4 in English was 84%, as against 61% the previous year. Reading rose from 66% to 86%. Writing rose from 53% to 76%; science from 73% to 81%. This was the sort of win-win we had been dreaming about.

Hitting Obstacles

What happened next showed the limitations of this school-by-school approach. School leaders have to juggle multiple agendas. That's the nature of the job they do. Happy as the head teacher of the school described above was to celebrate the improvements we had helped bring about, he did not allocate time or resources to sustaining them. Two years later, when the results achieved in the year we worked with the school were dismissed by inspectors as a 'blip', and the school was put into special measures, he owned up to having 'taken his eye off the ball'.

Our response was to develop more sophisticated ways of getting school leaders to stay with PROGRESS after the initial improvements had been achieved. And we sought to persuade more schools to buy into PROGRESS, hoping that we might achieve sufficient take-up to reach a tipping point, when the ideas at the heart of PROGRESS would be absorbed into thinking about the system as a whole, leading to people starting to make the argument for a wholly different model of school accountability. In retrospect, this seems ridiculously over-optimistic.

Time was running out for the New Labour project. Despite our best efforts, the Conservative MPs most likely to be shaping education policy after the next election tended to see social and emotional learning as a distasteful diversion from the real academic business of schools. We were urged to drop reference to emotions in favour of 'grit'; the academies and free school programmes they promised to set up were always going to favour leaders intent on finding the most direct route to improving their test scores. Schools were going to lose the funding designated for SEAL, even as their budgets started to shrink.

Following the election of the coalition government, we tried to establish our relevance to the core business of schools by merging with Human Scale Education (HSE) and aligning ourselves with the Whole Education movement to give children a fully rounded education. We gathered together the evidence that had emerged from evaluations of SEAL (Banerjee, 2010) and PROGRESS about the importance of the links between school culture and attainment. And we created a low-cost automated version of the online instrument that we hoped schools might adopt, even in the more financially and conceptually constrained world we were moving into. But we found that there was a fundamental problem with this latter strategy: successful implementation of PROGRESS had been reliant on highly skilled consultants holding the space between different voices, keeping them in play until a clear strategy could emerge out of the

interaction between them. With no resources available to buy in the consultant role, schools could find themselves challenged by data that felt too hot to handle.

The End of Antidote

And when we did get closer to schools, it became clear also that it had been the government injunction to adopt SEAL which had enabled leaders to suspend their disbelief long enough to discover the benefits of taking part in PROGRESS; this was much more difficult to achieve if they were simply selecting the process from a shopping list of possible interventions.

The rankings on that list were increasingly being determined by a body, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), that had been set up by the incoming education secretary Michael Gove to evaluate 'what works' in narrowing the gap between the test scores of disadvantaged kids and their peers. Getting a place on that shopping list was extremely difficult for us: our involvement in the history of SEAL made it hard to differentiate our offer from curriculum-based models for developing social and emotional skills; the fact that PROGRESS was still an evolving process when the contracts started to dry up made it problematic arguing that we were ready to take our programme to scale; the bigger difficulty was that it was always going to be hard to prove a significant impact on the relative educational attainment of a specific group (disadvantaged kids) through a process as indirect as changing school culture. We were not helped by the lack of any significant evidence from elsewhere to back up our claim that using democratic voice to capture stakeholders' perspectives and trigger a discussion of how to change the way schools worked as a whole system could tip the balance towards more disadvantaged kids. All of which led us eventually, after much soul-searching, to the conclusion that our time was up.

Our last hurrah was the publication by Demos, in 2013, of our report (Park, 2013) on the case for 'multi-perspective inspection'. This drew on everything we had learned over the past 16 years about how to shape school cultures that enabled young people to thrive. We argued for the development of a model that would value the opinions of leaders, staff, students, parents *and* inspectors about a school's performance, instead of allowing the judgement of one group – the inspectors – to prevail against everyone else. The report was judged to be of sufficient interest to merit slots on the *Today* programme and in the *Sun* newspaper. But while people clearly enjoyed the spectacle of Ofsted being bashed, it did not seem that they were particularly interested in the alternative model being proposed. People took it as read that it was unrealistic to expect anything of this sort to be taken seriously anytime soon. And looking around today, it does not seem that anybody is putting forward alternatives that do not resemble either a reversion to the local authority–based model that Ofsted replaced, or an attempt at professional capture, like the proposal for peer inspections put forward by the Headteachers' Roundtable.

Lessons Learned

My advice to all those seeking for ways of addressing the mental health crisis among children and young people would be that they start from where we ended up: thinking about how to put real urgency into the quest for an alternative to the accountability framework described by Greany and Higham (2018). What this might involve includes:

1. Recruiting an army of people to gather evidence for the toxic impacts of the system we currently have in place, particularly on children and young people, and finding systematic ways of deploying this evidence to show what is really going on for some young people.
2. Searching far and wide for alternative accountability models that have been shown to work, and getting a real discussion going about what an alternative system to the one we have might look like.
3. Taking a stand against those who want to polarise discussion around a binary opposition between 'traditional' and 'progressive' models of teaching.
4. Evolving a distinctive language to differentiate what they are proposing from things that look similar: when 'student voice' is about a school council deciding the design of a new uniform, it is not the same thing as every student having a 'voice' in what they learn and how they learn; 'whole-school emotional' literacy means something very different when it is about every member of the school community taking responsibility for their impact on its emotional culture, compared with every student having a compartmentalised hour a week to think about their emotions.
5. Challenging the notion that the school system is in a state of crisis which requires 'urgent' action and remembering that similar calls for a quick response were put out by Kenneth Baker in 1988, by Charles Clarke in 2002, by Ed Balls in 2008, by Michael Gove in 2011, by Nicky Morgan in 2015, and by others in between. Much better to sit down with the teaching profession and all other stakeholders to work out how to manage an education system that works for everybody.

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JAMES PARK, a writer and photographer, is currently developing a cycle route around the coast of England, Scotland and Wales. The author of books on British cinema, psychotherapy and emotional literacy, he set up Antidote in 1997 with psychotherapist Susie Orbach, and was the organisation's only director. *Correspondence*: jamesrobertpark@icloud.com