

The relational work of compassion and toxicity at a pupil referral unit

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sagepub.com/journals-permissionsDOI: [10.1177/13505084211015376](https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084211015376)journals.sagepub.com/home/org**Sharon Bolton**

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Abstract

This article contributes to the literature on compassion in organisations by exploring, through the sociology of relational work, how compassion emerges against the backdrop of what is described as structural toxicity; that is, structures, policies and practices that create the material stage upon which compassion may, or may not, materialise. Underfunding, social deprivation and draconian performance measures are all examples of structural toxicities that may trigger relational toxicity, that is conflict, suffering and disconnection at work but also where compassion may emerge in various forms. It is against this backdrop that we seek to address the conceptual and empirical gap in current understandings of compassion in organisations. Theorising from the empirical field, a case is presented in which compassion emerges as a product of the ongoing relational work of teachers in response to structural toxicities that trigger repeated instances of emotional pain and suffering but also joy and engagement with their work and each other.

Keywords

Compassion strategy, performance management, pupil referral unit, relational work, structural toxicity, teachers

Introduction

The call for more compassionate organisations and support for the development of ‘compassion capabilities’ (Lilius et al., 2008) has been highly influential and a welcome addition to over

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sanitised accounts of organisational life. At the heart of prevalent approaches to compassion at work is a focus on the nature and quality of interpersonal work, narratives of compassion giving and the particularities of the organisations that contribute or undermine the building of compassion capabilities (Dutton et al., 2006a; Frost, 2003; Kanov et al., 2004). Recent contributions to research on compassion have added nuance by emphasising an additional sufferer sub-process, which is thought to play a vital aspect in the creation and display of compassion at work by highlighting the agency of all parties involved as they shape the nature of giving and receiving of compassion (Kanov et al., 2017: 758).

Nevertheless, despite advances in the conceptual presentation of compassion at work, analysis tends to remain rooted in individual suffering, with an equally individualised response from those with innate compassionate capabilities within harmonious and stable emotional ecologies (Dutton et al., 2006b; Frost and Robinson, 1999; Lilius et al., 2008; Madden et al., 2012). Theoretical framings of compassion capabilities are informed by *a priori* assumptions of what positive expressions of emotion are, and how they may be shared; neglecting how positive and negative emotions are often mutually informative and necessarily complex (Fineman, 2006). Further, dominant theoretical approaches to compassion in organisations rest on the notion that the existence and recognition of individual suffering is framed by institutionalised compassion strategies; though evidence suggests that this is not automatically the case and if and how compassion is delivered varies significantly between group and organisational settings (Kanov et al., 2017; Lilius et al., 2008; Simpson et al., 2014).

As research on compassion in organisations is still a relatively new field, empirical, conceptual and theoretical gaps remain due to the heavy reliance on positive psychology upon which much of current debate depends (Frost et al., 2000; Lilius et al., 2008). This article contributes to the literature on compassion in organisations by questioning, through a realist relational work lens, how compassion emerges and manifests itself against the backdrop of what we describe as structural toxicity. Structural toxicity refers to formal structures, policies and practices that create the material stage upon which people are potentially denied the opportunity to meet their relational needs. Underfunding, social deprivation and draconian performance measures are all examples of structural toxicities that may trigger relational toxicity, that is conflict, suffering and disconnection at work. Yet, the paper highlights that structural toxicity does not inevitably lead to relational ‘evils’ such as distrust, estrangement and calculating purposefulness (Donati and Archer, 2015: 50), but also the giving and receiving of compassion. It is against this backdrop that we seek to address the conceptual and empirical gap in current understandings of compassion in organisations. Theorising from the empirical field, a case is presented in which compassion emerges as a product of the ongoing relational work of teachers in response to structural toxicities that trigger repeated instances of emotional pain and suffering. In a similar vein to other caring professional groups who face high pressure environments (Meerabeau and Page, 1998), through shared experience, a very particular emotional ecology is formed and, over time, becomes institutionalised through ongoing relational work and the creation of compassion strategies. Such an emotional ecology creates a safe space for staff to act out the structural toxicity they face every day so that relational toxicity is often transformed into compassionate support and new forms of compassion capabilities emerge (Lilius et al., 2008). To highlight the complex juxtaposition of structural toxicity with institutionalised compassion strategies, data is presented in the form of vignettes that reveal in full colour the daily life of the PRU.

The theoretical scaffold of relational work is situated in the realm of relational sociology; an approach that has been advocated in this journal as a promising lens that can identify and explore connections and disconnections between organisations, people and broader contexts (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014; Mutch et al., 2006). The framework of relational work is utilised as a means of capturing the deeply human interactions and negotiations between teachers over emotions,

meanings and concrete practices that are at the heart of the collective nurturing of compassion capabilities and emergent compassion within distinctive organisational, political and economic contexts (Bandelj, 2012; Donati and Archer, 2015; Zelizer, 2012). In this way, the relational work lens allows an exploration of how structural toxicity becomes intertwined with emergent compassion strategies and practices, resulting in the co-existence of relational toxicity and compassion and indicating 'mutually informative' (Fineman, 2006: 13) positive and negative emotions.

The analysis is informed by rich qualitative data that supports the presentation of a compelling story about the working life of teachers in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in the UK. The PRU is an unknown entity to many people as it is neither a school nor a special school; it is more of an emergency intervention offering temporary placement to enhance educational achievement and improve the behaviour of children who have been excluded or referred from mainstream schools due to behavioural problems. The very notion of PRUs has attracted a great deal of public attention, most often negative and misinformed, on 'bad behaviour' and the cost of educating excluded children. We argue that there are structural toxicities which mediate against the PRU creating compassion strategies: children who attend come from a deprived social landscape, with chequered personal histories and limited social skills and the culture of performativity in combination with the allocation of tight financial budgets and staffing that now pervades the public sector fails to recognise compassion as a vital element of teachers' work (Taggart, 2011). In such an environment, institutionalised compassion strategies are rare and pressures are placed on teachers' relationships with colleagues and the systems they rely on for support. In particular, it is revealed how structural toxicities manifest as relational toxicity. Children at the PRU can be aggressive and unresponsive; they meet patience, caring and empathy offered by teachers and support staff with physical violence and verbal abuse. Staff are exhausted and frustrated, and a confrontational interactional style is integral to their daily work. The loud and apparently harsh environment of the PRU may be labelled as a '*toxic emotional ecology*' (Frost, 2003) and that working with children with behavioural challenges engenders anger, passion, aggression and despair. And yet, this article illustrates how intertwined within these apparently toxic relational episodes are moments of compassion that emerge from the relational work of teachers and serve to meet the need to mediate the pain of organisational life. In this environment, toxicity and compassion are inseparable as day-to-day life at the PRU, indeed organisational life more broadly, does not lend itself to neat categorisation.

Introducing relational work for understanding compassion in organisations

The importance of the quality and quantity of social relations for economic interactions, often expressed in the terminology of social networks or degrees of 'embeddedness', are widely acknowledged (Bandelj, 2015; Block, 2012; Granovetter, 1985). Whilst relational work shares the sentiment of the importance of social relations for economic and organisational practices, its theoretical thrust differs from these approaches. Inspired by vibrant discussions in the heterogeneous domain of relational sociology (e.g. Donati and Archer, 2015; Emirbayer, 1997), relational work captures the practices people engage in, in tandem with positive and negative emotions that emerge together with shared understandings people relationally produce when developing, sustaining and disconnecting social relationships (Bandelj, 2015; Tilly, 2011; Zelizer, 2012).

Mutch et al. (2006) and Jenkins and Delbridge (2014) utilise a critical realist relational sociology within the field of organisational analysis. Here, organisational practices are contextualised in the broader economic and social sphere, including dynamics within the labour market, competition in product markets and political regimes. Within this frame, the wider political and economic sphere are seen to offer enablers and constraints for the agency of employees and management which may

mediate, consent or resist organisational practices. The relational work concept advocated here shares many similarities with this relational sociology approach, which is particularly evident in the focus on the interplay between structure and practice; producing, for example, a structural and relational toxicity. However, we add further emphasis on relational agency that is represented by the idea that 'the decisions, choices and actions of each of us are not purely individual acts, but are arrived at in relation to and with others' (Donati and Archer, 2015: 15). Thus highlighting how people understand the demands organisations place upon them and search actively for ways to reconcile demands and the needs and wants of the social relations in which they are embedded.

In particular, the relational work lens highlights compassion capabilities and strategies and the way structural and relational toxicity emerges from relational work in the context of professional codes of conduct and formal and informal organisational rules, resulting in unique expressions of compassion. The emphasis on interactional effort to arrive at an understanding of relationships and how this is intertwined with meaning and emotions highlights people as sentient, evaluative and practical beings to whom things matter (Archer, 2003; Sayer, 2011). This is an important aspect when it comes to understanding compassion as it embeds its giving and receiving in organisations with the human capacity to form commitments and attachments. Further, the on-going efforts people engage in to form shared understandings of their relationships, re-evaluate them and reflect upon economic transactions heightens compassion as labour intensive relational work that combines emotions, meaning making and concrete practices. Therein, compassion is theorised not just as an individualistic endeavour, or as an innate psychological capacity, but as an emergent collective accomplishment that continuously reflects and re-negotiates the nature of the relationships. Further, relational work serves to emphasise that compassion and toxicity are inextricably welded (Author A; Fineman, 2006: 13) as they are enacted within multiple and layered frameworks of sense making. Emotions are not static cultural entities but subject to on-going negotiation, mediation and change. People's expression of emotions, ranging from sympathy and compassion to despair and anger, serve to identify, heighten, but also defend shared understandings of commitments and needs, expressed through specific practices (Author A; Zelizer, 2012).

The analysis presented here enables an in-depth understanding of the particular shapes and forms compassion and toxicity take as part of teachers' on-going interpretation and mediation of the particular emotional ecology in the PRU, which emerges from a rich and diverse mix of professional ethos and informal, but nevertheless institutionalised, occupational norms that are embodied in modes of interaction between staff. Not least, the connection between the PRU's emotional ecology, and teachers' relational toxicity and compassion is embedded in the highly instrumentalised approaches to education and teacher performance and the economically, and often socially, deprived backgrounds of the pupils, which we describe as creating structural toxicities.

Research process

Data presented in this article are drawn from a qualitative study situated in a pupil referral unit (PRU) for primary aged children situated in the North West of England. Over a period of almost ten years (April 2003–February 2013) visits were made to the PRU, including an invitation to join staff team building days and various off-site social events. Further individual interviews were conducted with two teachers in 2014 and again in 2015, though the focus of this study is the first ten years. In total, eleven members of staff were individually interviewed; five repeatedly over a ten year period and two repeatedly over a twelve year period. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Time at the school was spent observing individual teachers in class, sitting in assemblies observing the whole school together, shadowing the head teacher and joining staff in the staff room at

break and lunch times and also for staff meetings after school. While spending time in their classrooms, in the staff room or when joining in social occasions, teachers and support staff would recount events and express their feelings about their work, their colleagues and the children they teach. Over a ten year period a total of 73 days of participant observation took place; a more intensive period in the first and second year of engagement, followed by shorter annual visits during the following years. In this way the pace and movement of life at the PRU is effectively captured with observances of daily life depicted as they happened and staff offering commentary on incidents as they occurred or reflecting on incidents with colleagues in the staff room shortly afterwards. Wherever time and opportunity allowed, hand-written notes were taken, or written as soon as possible following the observation, and reflective diaries were penned in the evenings.

In such a polymorphic approach to research (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013), the researcher cannot dissolve into the background and be a mere observer, nor can they claim bias free interpretation of the data. The researcher is both a collector and teller of stories and is part of the story itself, creating an impetus to craft something meaningful and important (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). Immersion in the world of the PRU was at first difficult as the interactional style between staff is different to anything encountered in other work settings. As the data reveals, life at the PRU tends to be fast-paced with loud interactions between staff, and staff and pupils, along with a constant sense of movement. There was never any sense of behaviour being moderated due to the presence of the researcher, on the contrary it was expected that any visitor to the PRU should quickly acclimatise and become part of the scene. Over time, attending the PRU became a less uncomfortable experience, though never normalised and the researcher can never claim to 'have gone native.' Nevertheless, the researcher felt a significant burden of responsibility towards staff to ensure that the story of their day-to-day working life is told with accuracy and compassion.

Analysis of data was a continuous process beginning from the very first stage of data collection as the researcher engaged and tried to make sense of the new environment. As new data was collected, previously collected data would be revisited when different issues arose, or staff referred to recent situations as examples. The researcher engaged and re-engaged in the interview transcripts, observation notes and reflective diaries in order to make sense of a world that at first felt alien but became more familiar as the period of immersion extended. The reflective diaries offered a form of data and analysis and represented a continuous interpretive process that particularly highlighted the changing perspective of the researcher and an evolving understanding of the complex emotional ecology of the PRU. In analysing the data this no doubt impacted on interpretation and analysis as it became ever clearer that notions of toxicity and compassion are apparent but not easily separated into analytical categories. Absorption in the occupational community and the data during different periods of time clarified the need to link episodes of relational toxicity with evidence of structural toxicities. It is a rare exception where an outburst or quietly cruel comment is not associated with the background of the children or performance pressures on staff. Likewise, the episodes of emergent compassion occur often at one and the same moment and sometimes in an apparently toxic form. The difficulties in identifying the difference in relational toxicity or emergent compassion in many of the experiences and exchanges between staff, and staff and pupils, were mediated as more and more time was spent at the PRU and a greater understanding of their day-to-day world was gained. Nevertheless, staying true to a polymorphic approach, the often contradictory nature of the data brought colour and joy to the research process and, as knowledge of the emotional ecology of the PRU grew, the attempts to offer binary accounts of toxicity and compassion lessened (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). Observations and staff story telling often included pupils, however the focus here is on interaction between staff; though the pupils are always necessarily a feature.

To enhance the application of relational work as an interpretive device, the data is supported with an analytical scaffold which emerged from the literature on compassion and the data collected from the PRU. The notion of *structural toxicities* is used to describe the positioning of the PRU, the context in which it operates and the impact this has on organisational structures, policies and day-to-day life, *relational toxicity* demonstrates how people's relationships are affected by working in the pressured environment that structural toxicities represent, and *emergent compassion* displays how, despite such pressures and lack of formal support mechanisms for staff, they find the space to offer understanding and support to one another. Finally, *compassion strategies* are what the literature would understand as institutionalised processes and practices that enable compassion to be created and shared. The data presented are taken from across the ten years of involvement with the PRU and 12 years of involvement with staff.

When talking of structural toxicity there is remarkable consistency over time in teachers' recognition of the social and political positioning of the PRU and its pupils. The rhythm of life at the PRU also remained consistent in terms of low staff turnover and stable relationships, intake of new pupils, departing of pupils to other schools and annual events such as school concerts. Hence, the data is not presented as episodes of time but as a narrative of life in a particular organisational space (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). However, what changes is the commentary regarding increasing expectations of teacher performance as a structural toxicity and how this impacts relational toxicity and the capacity for compassion to emerge. The article relies on the reader's full absorption in the story that is to be told and their willingness to interpret and re-interpret the events and experiences presented to them through the offered lens of relational work (Barthes, 1977). This cannot be accomplished by the usual formulaic presentation of literature review, theory and data that limits the space for critical engagement and new questions to be raised (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). We are in fact offering a 'story about stories' (Rhodes and Brown, 2005) that is the product of intimate knowledge of the key characters and plot (Gabriel, 2000). Such intimacy reveals a world that is unknown to many and an occupational community whose interactional style does not represent the expected norms for teachers' professional conduct. Without full absorption and readiness to grasp the underlying dynamics of the complex relational work undertaken by staff at the PRU, the story presented here could easily be dismissed as an exception or a fiction. Hence why we ask that the reader works with us in this polymorphic approach as 'fellow evaluative beings' (Sayer, 2011: 12) in order to grasp an emergent understanding of the day to day reality of life at the PRU.

The challenges of presenting such rich and voluminous data are well documented (Van Maanen, 1988) and created several structural challenges in how to condense life at the PRU in a journal article. However, in the storytelling tradition, the PRU is portrayed through a series of short vignettes, each opening up to scrutiny the inner-life of a particular organisational form and its emotional ecology. Beginning with a review of Pupil Referral Units, an unusual combination of literature, policy documents and media reports are interwoven with rich data, in order that the PRU, the context of *structural toxicities* and staff's understanding of that context is introduced in detail. The themes of *relational toxicity* and *emergent compassion* are developed in the presentation of the staff room scenario and *compassion strategies* in the presentation of the school concert (*Thriller*). The review, the staff room scenario and the end of term show (*Thriller*) offer a vivid portrayal of the emotional ecology of the PRU, displaying how structural and relational toxicity, emergent compassion and compassion strategies are inextricably linked.

Research context: Structural toxicities and the pupil referral unit

Despite a long-standing educational policy of inclusion in the UK, the provision of off-site units such as PRUs has increased over the past 25 years. Indeed, the PRUs have become the most

common alternative institution for excluded pupils in the United Kingdom, resulting in 14,050 pupils being registered with PRUs in 2013, while the debate concerning pupil behaviour and educational standards grows fiercer (Cole, 2015). PRUs are viewed as a perennial problem for local education authorities and a drain on resources, with little positive coverage of the work they do and a great deal of media attention given to radical practices employed by PRUs, such as locking a teenager in a padded room (BBC, 2014). It is the aim of PRUs to re-integrate children back into mainstream education, though this is not always the case and some children stay for years, not months or weeks as policy envisions (Gazeley et al., 2013). Even when a significant diagnosis is made the PRU finds it very difficult to find an appropriate placement for that child as there are insufficient funded special schools. PRUs have become known as 'dumping grounds' for disruptive pupils and claims are made that high performing schools too quickly exclude pupils who may undermine their status in the rankings (Cassidy, 2012; Menzies and Baars, 2015).

Attempts were made to alter what is referred to as a 'flawed system' (Coughlan, 2012) by ensuring PRUs operate and maintain the same educational standards and operational norms as mainstream schools. Sweeping reforms set out in the new education bill propose that PRUs may become academies, funded by the private sector (Coughlan, 2012), in what some see as an 'out of sight, out of mind' policy (Bolton and Laaser, 2020). However, much of this rhetoric appears to ignore that the pupils who attend PRUs have already been excluded from the system in a myriad of ways, not only mainstream schooling (Cole, 2015). They are mainly from socially deprived backgrounds, mostly boys, many with undiagnosed mental health issues and/or special educational needs and some with criminal records from as young as four years old (Abrams, 2007; Coughlan, 2012). Many have suffered emotional trauma in their short lives. A large number of the children are living in local children's homes, with foster carers, or reside with one parent in often socially difficult conditions; such as inadequate housing, limited income due to long-term unemployment or illness and/ or parents who are dependent on drugs and alcohol (Gazeley et al., 2013; Taylor, 2012).

PRUs, and their pupils, may be viewed as existing on the fringes of the educational system but they are subject to the same performance regime as a mainstream school (Cole, 2015). OFSTED, the UK's school inspection authority, report that PRUs are undermined by negative stereotyping (OFSTED, 2009) and recognise many of the difficulties faced. Nevertheless, governments have been found to ignore the 'collateral impact' on learning and attainment of bringing a group of behaviourally challenged children together (David, 2010) and have set targets for pupils' academic performance that many mainstream schools could not achieve (Cole, 2015). In response, government ministers look to poor teaching as the main cause of academic failure and express the view that 'most local authority-run pupil referral units are not up to snuff' (Vasager and Shepherd, 2011). Recent research suggest that, in practice, OFSTED inspections take no account of special circumstances and are unduly derogatory about teaching achievements (Bolton and Laaser, 2020).

The PRU featured here underwent several OFSTED inspections during the period of research. The first was declared as requiring a status of 'special measures', the PRU was then inspected on three other separate occasions over a period of twelve months and eventually declared 'out of special measures.' It then underwent two further OFSTED inspections and was declared as 'satisfactory¹' on both occasions. At the same time as PRUs were given more independence to manage their own affairs (Department for Education [DfE], 2013), a new Head Teacher was appointed who is ambitious to be seen as 'turning the PRU around'. In addition to the pressures of continual external inspections, staff now also experience the day-to-day demands of improving the academic performance of pupils and are under continual scrutiny with frequent 'observations' and new performance measures put in place. Teachers generally fare well in inspections of their teaching but nevertheless report feeling under increasing pressure and that such scrutiny is 'taking away space to develop relationships with the children'. The PRU is small – 45 children, 5 teachers (including

head and deputy head teachers) and 10 LSAs². It should be noted that when the research began in 2003 there were 6 teachers, 15 LSAs and 32 pupils. The majority of staff are female. On average one teacher will take a class of 5–6 children. As in the standard primary school setting, teachers stay with the same group of children for the whole school year covering the entire national curriculum. Each teacher has the support of LSAs – some of whom are assigned to offer one-to-one assistance with particular children.

It is an everyday occurrence in the PRU for a teacher to be physically attacked by a child; kicking, biting and throwing things are the most popular strategies of attack employed by restless children. Teachers and LSAs report being bitten in the face and one experienced constant kicking at her ankles so that she wore thick socks and boots for several weeks, even during a June heat-wave. When a child becomes highly agitated and physically violent a cry of ‘kick off’ can be heard and staff will run to the aid of a particular teacher. Previous practices of physically ‘restraining’ a child are now discouraged and it can take several staff to calm a situation through cajoling and playing ‘good cop/ bad cop’. Frequently, the police will be called and staff recount incidents of the classroom ‘being trashed’ but waiting for hours for a police response. In addition, verbal abuse is a moment-by-moment occurrence: ‘F*** Off!’ is a frequent retort and ‘fat bitch!’ a common descriptive device employed by pupils. Indeed, staff often respond by asking the pupils to vary their insults, be more creative or spell the expletive and on one observed occasion the teacher responded to a pupil ‘hey you, less of the fat!’

A teacher at a PRU spends far more time than a teacher in a mainstream school liaising with parents and other services, such as social workers or educational psychologists. There are, however, limited resources and teachers may not always be able to access the expertise they require to support a child. For example, the PRU is allocated an ‘allowance’ of three educational psychologist reports within one school term even if they have six children they believe require them. Communication with parents can be difficult as teachers attempt to extend set behaviour plans outside of school hours, or parents do not collect children from the PRU at the end of the day (or deliver them at the beginning of the day). Frustrations are also expressed when teachers feel parents or foster carers are under desperate pressures and are not provided with adequate support from other agencies as children are dismissed as ‘naughty’ without a consideration of underlying issues they might face. Overall, staff express anger that they, the children and carers rest outside of the system and are ignored as a ‘lost cause’. Additional pressures prevail as a market driven system called ‘preventative placement’ has been recently introduced. Mainstream schools pay the PRU to temporarily provide placements to children with the intention of an improvement in behaviour and reintegration (Cole, 2015). However, many mainstream schools are reluctant to reintegrate the child and will renegotiate another paid placement or will threaten to permanently exclude the child.

Clearly there is an enduring public and policy perception that this community is indeed a toxic environment. And yet, this serves to reinforce not only the PRU’s sense of isolation but also its special status which in turn acts to strengthen the existing emotional ecology. Much like gynaecological nurses (Author A) or slaughterhouse workers (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1992), the staff at the PRU are defined by the stigma attached to their work and the children they teach. As a result, staff who work at the PRU mainly socialise with each other outside of working hours and informal friendship networks are almost entirely founded on relationships formed at work which, in turn, further strengthens their sense of ‘specialness’. Their distinctive identity as a group is expressed in statements such as ‘no-one understand us but us’ and ‘it’s us against the world’. The PRU has difficulty attracting staff and nationally there is a shortage of qualified teachers who are available, and willing, to work with excluded children (Abrams, 2007). Though, interestingly, at the PRU, both teachers and support staff remain for a number of years. In an example of how an apparently toxic environment provides shared understanding, compassion and support, a teacher recalls how he left

the PRU in exasperation and exhaustion but returned within a year as he claimed to have '*missed the little bastards and the mad bitches who work here*' and another will not leave to apply for a more senior post in another PRU because she fears that she '*cannot survive this job without this lot*'. Indeed, staff admit to being addicted to the challenges of working at the PRU and their loyalty and perseverance has the perverse effect of ensuring that the PRU remains rooted in structural toxicities.

Relational toxicity and emergent compassion – the staff room

The staff room at the PRU is a hub of activity that peaks and wanes according to the rhythm of the school day. It is the PRU's 'backstage' (Goffman, 1967) and acts, according to the head teacher, as the 'beating heart' of the occupational community; a space where staff can come together and be 'themselves'. Via numerous small exchanges, staff share, interpret, shape and re-shape events, feelings and relationships. It is a site of continuously emerging compassion and relational toxicity that blend and grow into sustaining rituals of compassion, though often delivered in an apparently toxic form. It is in the staff room that the contradictory hues of the emotional ecology at the PRU are most fully revealed. Drawing on their collective view of the status of the PRU and the work they do as special, staff have developed their own particular forms of communication that echo the structural toxicities they face day-to-day. Staff are aware that their style of exchange with one another is deemed as unusual, many comment how difficult it is to become 'attuned' when they first arrive. However, the aggressive form of talk and black humour is normalised and encouraged as a distinct social bond of shared understanding. Indeed, it is the staff room that represents an arena in which teachers establish mutual expectations that rest on distinct understandings and meanings of practices and interactions and, ultimately, an understanding of themselves as 'belonging to a We' (Donati and Archer, 2015: 91), encapsulated in joint action and commitment.

In the private space of the staff room, community activity centres on a number of rituals that have become embedded into daily routines. The tone of communication is often aggressive and full of expletives; in contradiction to the formalised and professional imagery associated with teachers. Staff appear to derive comfort from such rituals. A teacher comments that they knew they 'belonged' once other staff began to include them in banter that is conducted in a sharp, judgemental tone driven by a dry, sarcastic humour that can be cruel. Whilst recognising that such interaction can, and often does, create relational toxicity at times, staff mention how they view it as a 'supportive practice' and that it demonstrates for the staff that they have developed necessary interactional skills: 'we have to be tough do deal with the s*** that comes our way every day'. What appears to be rituals of humiliation, are in fact institutionalised compassion strategies that offer a sense of belonging and shared understandings of the structural toxicities staff face.

Before the children arrive and after they leave, the majority of teachers and LSAs can be found in the staff room. Food and drink are a central focus of activity around which a range of conversations develop, from discussions about particular pupils, personal relationships, to diet, weight and clothes. The partners of staff are a particular topic of discussion as the ups and downs of intimate relationships are discussed in detail and, amidst shouts of laughter, cries of incredulity and groans of anger, comments are provided: 'bin him, he's useless'; 'chop it off, that'll stop him'; or 'stupid bitch, why do you put up with it'. The deep intimacy the staff share about personal relationships and everyday concerns offers them a safe space to reflect and consider normative questions about what is good or bad and what to do for the best (Sayer, 2011: 16). In the mornings, the relational work is most visible as staff settle into a way of relating that continually re-affirms the deep social bonds they share. The kettle is continuously on the boil, the toaster pops and the microwave pings to prepare the mountains of food staff bring to share and then tousle over as they argue over who

eats what and how much amid cries of ‘you’re not going to eat all that are you? No wonder you’ve got such a fat a***!’ and ‘I’ll swap my salad for your curry, you need the salad more than I do’. There are weight scales in the staff room that are always at the heart of activity in the morning as staff weigh themselves and announce weight gain or loss to a regular chorus of ‘skinny bint’ or ‘saggy arse’ depending on what is reported. And so the day begins as staff discuss what they have planned, some of the challenges they expect to face from particular pupils or some of the successes they hope to achieve. There are also inevitable squabbles and one up(wo)manship as staff jostle to claim theirs is the most difficult group of children with comments that are only half in jest. An LSA observes how much she depends on the morning interaction rituals to ‘set her up for the day’ and describes how they help her move into the ‘peculiar world of the PRU’.

At mid-morning/ afternoon breaks and lunch-time staff presence is staggered as they are on ‘playground duty’ or ‘detention duty’. However, there is constant movement and lively conversation as staff move in and out of the room eager to tell of their experiences that day. Within the PRU’s environment the humour is black, the comments harsh and gestures of support often appear aggressive. Yet, the environment in general and the black humour are devices that help to process and get on with serious challenges at work. Conversation in the staff room centres on children who have been most difficult that day and staff commiserate with each other in very particular ways: as one teacher enters the staff room, quite out of breath having just chased a child down the corridor and declaring the need ‘to slit that bastard’s throat’, another teacher replies ‘no, no, darling, let me disembowel him first’. As an LSA enters the room in a distressed state she reports that a child has run off and almost been knocked down by a bus; a teacher retorts ‘Damn, I wish I’d been driving the bus, I wouldn’t have missed’. Comments such as these are met with a combination of earnest nods of endorsement and hoots of laughter. Whilst the language appears harsh and abusive, within the boundary of structural toxicities faced by teachers and LSAs in the PRU these types of interactions are normalised and framed within shared understandings of the need for compassion and understanding. During the research process, staff express concern that exchanges, such as the one describing the bus scenario above, would be viewed as shocking by most people unfamiliar with the PRU. Nevertheless, they also express a sense of close community that they ‘treasure’ and wish to maintain. Their sense of specialness is sustained through relational toxicity, reflecting the particular way sympathy, support, concern and, to a degree, friendship, are communicated within this community (Author; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Against the backdrop of additional structural toxicities in the shape of increasing expectation of teacher performance, the staff room serves as the central hub that strengthens staff’s resilience; as a teacher ironically observes: ‘they (management) ask us to achieve the impossible with no concern for the s*** we wade through every day . . . we can’t do that without each other and our own special form of madness.’

At the end of the day, once the children have left the building, the staff room once again becomes a hub of activity. Formal team meetings are held after School once a week, though informal exchanges about children’s progress are a continuous feature of conversation. More recently, staff observe that staff room dynamics have changed over the years with less time ‘for getting things off our chests’ and more time spent on preparing teaching and consulting each other on lesson plans and how to ‘get through’ what feels like ‘never ending observations and rounds of criticism of our teaching’. From early days of observation, when the PRU appeared to be non-hierarchical in its dealings with staff, the staff room now has ‘whispering places’ where teachers and LSAs gather to express anger and despair away from management concerning what they experience as additional pressures in the shape of, for example, heightened targets for student attainment that are tightly coupled with teachers performance evaluation. The change was met with anger, resentment and sarcasm. One teacher notes how ‘children can hardly read when they arrive here and we’re meant

to bring them in line with their peers in mainstream schools!' and another observes 'it takes all of our time to teach these children standard classroom behaviour but now they want us to make them Einstein in just a few weeks.'

Despite staff voicing frustration with the structural toxicities within which they operate, staff engage in relational work and compassion emerges as they continue to express affection and concern for the children they teach. Frequently staff talk of developing strong feelings for particular children. A child who is known to have had a difficult week at home is discussed at length and teachers convey a wish to know what she will be doing at the weekend and if she is being cared for. Often such conversations will be followed by phone calls to carers or support agencies to pass on concerns or to alert of particular issues. Sometimes a teacher will escort the child home in order to have a face-to-face conversation with their carer and learn more about the child's background. However, though staff never talk of maintaining professional distance from the children and carers, indeed both teachers and LSAs are often heard to say if they 'didn't care too much they couldn't do the job', they lament that close involvement brings 'heartache'. Teachers may be found weeping in the staffroom after they have said goodbye to a child who is moving back to mainstream school or when they learn that a child has been the victim of abuse. Indeed, tears of frustration and sorrow are a common occurrence in the staff room which forms a space for emotional outbursts of all hues. Such outbursts are normalised in the 'safe' place of the staff room to such a degree that they often go unattended – not unnoticed, or disregarded, just accepted with a quiet dignity as an imminent feature of everyday working life within the PRU. Here, compassion capability is evident at every turn, even if expressed in unusual ways or not openly expressed at all.

Compassion strategy – thriller

The end of term show is a big event at the PRU. The Christmas and summer concerts are planned in meticulous detail and represent an institutionalised compassion strategy in their recognition of the respect, esteem and pleasure they bring to staff, pupils and parents. On the one hand staff lament about the amount of work involved but on the other they talk animatedly of numerous successful concerts and the lasting impact they have on all involved. The summer concert normally consists of the children and staff performing a show, followed by prize giving and farewells to those children and staff who are moving on. In the summer of 2010, the children and staff performed Thriller, emulating the well-known Michael Jackson music video with dancing zombies. Feelings are running high. Children are excited and staff confess to 'getting very emotional at this time of year.' There is a buzz as faces are painted and bright red zombie T-shirts are donned. Staff get the giggles and there are very loud, theatrical, 'sshhh, sshhh' from the head teacher, which makes the giggling worse. The corridor into the main hall is a snake of excited children and staff.

The head teacher goes out to the audience, made up of parents, carers, community policemen, social workers, who she describes as 'visiting dignitaries.' It is then time for the performance and 14 staff and 18 children line up on the stage and the music begins. The door creaks, the dancers move their feet – a string of Jackos. The audience gasps with laughter as some bodies go in opposite directions but they then fall silent and are entirely engaged in the performance. The deputy head's glasses glint over his zombie make-up. Some children express un-zombie like joy. Others appear to reluctantly engage. Overall, there is intense concentration as the routine progresses. As the performance ends, the audience stand and enthusiastically applaud the collective achievement in what staff describe as a 'defining moment' when 'for 20 minutes all the s*** we shovel throughout the year comes together in one sweet smelling heap!'

When it comes to the time for the children to leave and take their final bus journey from the PRU, the teachers voice mixed feelings as they say goodbye to children, who will move to different

schools. Teachers and LSAs express sadness regarding children they have grown attached to but also feelings of dread that some will return. A teacher waves off an 11-year-old boy stating that 'he's one of our success stories, he'll do ok at his new school. He'll be one I'll remember.' The boy boards the bus, and the teacher turns to go back into the school. He then runs from the bus, towards the teacher. Another teacher moves, ready to intervene and steps back as she realises the boy is wrapping himself around the teacher in an affectionate hug, voicing a simple 'thanks, Miss.' Once the bus departs the teacher is inconsolable. She goes about the business of tidying the classroom, quietly crying for the rest of the afternoon. It is an uncomfortable observation and a teacher explains 'it's ok, we all vent at this time of year it's part of the ritual' and another refers to her feelings about the children 'we bring them in, we love them, we hate them, but we can't let them go because we fear for what life will bring to them.' Just as in the staff room, moments of sorrow are recognised but are not the focus of obvious attention. Invisible relational work is undertaken and compassion is evident in the way the teacher is allowed to openly express her feelings knowing that others understand and respect her care for the child and the process of 'venting.'

Relational work at the PRU

Rich data, drawn from a twelve-year period of involvement with the PRU and its staff, are presented as vignettes in an attempt to capture the lived reality. The relational work frame draws from a critical realist relational sociology approach (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2014; Mutch et al., 2006) which emphasises an historically and institutionally situated stance. In particular, the analysis presented in this article advocates that a relational approach should focus on the interplay between organisations and the wider political, economic and cultural context in which they are embedded in order to situate and understand practices of, and relationships within, organisations (Mutch, 2005). Focussing on how compassion emerges against the backdrop of structural toxicity, we add to this position a strong focus on human agency written into the relational understanding of actions, decisions and emotions as emerging within relation to and with others that are shaped, but not constrained, by the wider political, economic and cultural context (Donati and Archer, 2015; Sayer, 2011). Human interactions and negotiations over emotions, meanings and concrete practices emerge and create an emotional ecology that endures over time and becomes institutionalised to such a degree that it is able to enforce, mediate or sometimes even resist particular structural enablers and inhibitors of action. We argue that people's capacity to filter structural pressures in different ways through their relational work, is at the heart an emotional ecology that represents the collective nurturing of compassion capabilities within distinctive organisational, political and economic contexts. The appeal of such an approach lies in how it highlights the way staff at the PRU build, nourish and, sometimes, terminate interpersonal bonds and engage in on-going negotiations over the content and nature of their relationships and commitment to the occupation and pupils in the light of structural realities. Taking structure seriously, whilst providing a strong account of human agency, informs the analytical themes of *structural toxicities*, *relational toxicity*, *emergent compassion* and *compassion strategies*.

The structural toxicity of the PRU, which teachers experience as part of their day-to-day lived reality, is inherent in the changing political and educational landscape that offers contradictory challenges as funding cuts and performance measures detract from teachers' professional commitment to care for the pupils and provide them with opportunities to flourish. Therein, the relational work teachers engage in represent on-going attempts to form 'a modus vivendi' (Archer, 2003) between their professional commitment, care and concerns for the well-being of pupils and the implementation of performance targets, inadequate school budgets, shrinking numbers of full time staff and a rhetoric that renders pupils as a lost cause. Emergent compassion and relational toxicity

are at the heart of the interactional efforts that help clarify the nature of their social relationship with each other and the pupils, and the professional and moral values that guide them. Relational work offers the opportunity to unravel the nature of complex relationship, and the varying degrees of commitments and attachments to others, practices and institutions as key drivers for their compassion capabilities, strategies and attached meanings (Archer, 2003; Donati and Archer, 2015; Sayer, 2011). It broadens an understanding of emotion in organisations in its focus on the sharing of experiences, and the creation of meaning, which are embedded in the wider political economy of organisations and institutions (Bandelj, 2015; Block, 2012). The emphasis is not on individual coping mechanisms but on the dynamic interplay between political and economic structures that trigger and shape structural toxicity on the one hand and employees' on-going collective relational work on the other. It highlights that compassion and toxicity are part of ongoing relational work that creates particular emotional ecologies which emerge in different forms depending upon the challenges and conditions faced in and out of work.

Engagement with the stories told about life at the PRU through the lens of relational work highlights the systemic nature of toxicity and sets the material stage upon which staff members create, negotiate and maintain their distinct set of social relationships from which shared understandings emerge regarding occupational commitments, attachments to pupils and appropriate techniques to accomplish job demands. The interplay between material conditions, structural constraints and relational work is particularly evident in the case of teachers in the PRU, whose relational work is heavily reflective of and shaped by their continual engagement with battling for resources, dealing with the fall-out of lack of support for families and children at risk, and school exclusion policies. Though it may emulate other schools positioned in similar socio-economic landscapes, the PRU deals with the issues presented in a concentrated form leading to an intensity of experience for staff not shared elsewhere. It seems that the structural toxicity of this working environment breeds compassion as an integral feature of the relational work in which teachers and LSAs at the PRU engage and, in turn, creates an institutionalised emotional ecology that serves to buffer and mediate structural toxicity and thereby contributing to an effective organisational strategy; serving functional considerations of performativity (Dutton et al., 2006b; Kanov et al., 2004). It may be expressed in unusual ways, but it is compassion nevertheless as aggressive banter and humour provide care and sustenance and mark out the work that staff engage in as 'special.'

The staff room scenario offers a condensed view into the diverse facets of teachers' and LSAs' relational work at the PRU. It is in the staff room where relationships are built and where the meaning of the profession and commitments to pupils are expressed through shared stories of the daily struggles they face and the joy of their successes. It is in this space we see how relational toxicity and emergent compassion are often analytically inseparable, being at the heart of the shared understandings and negotiated meanings of relational beings (Donati, 2015). Sharp comments directed at personal relationships, body shape and harsh commentary about particular children appear to be highly toxic and yet serve to highlight compassion capabilities that deliver support and care for others, marking the distinctive nature of the emotional ecology of the PRU. Even the highly toxic tussles over food consumption and playground duty are open, swiftly dealt with and most often concluded with dry humour so that the space between relational toxicity and emergent compassion is once again difficult to identify. That is not to say all staff engage harmoniously in relational work and care deeply about each other, they do not. Some relationships are fraught with anxieties and tensions. Such relational toxicity has increased as the performativity culture is more rigorously enforced and staff compare themselves against each other, challenging the shared understanding of teachers and LSAs of their work as well as of a relationship that rests on mutuality, trust and empathy. Relational work is inevitably interwoven with economic

interactions, resulting in the prevalence of toxicity but, as we argue here, it also creates the conditions for particular forms of compassion to emerge.

The end of term concerts (Christmas and Summer) are particularly important public representations of the PRU and its achievements. The summer concert detailed in this article is typical of these events. Each one is planned to display the talents of the children and show how they have developed and to openly celebrate the relationship between the children and staff. They are described here as compassion strategies because of the significant investment in building confidence in the children so that they will present themselves with flair to an external audience whilst allowing staff to be recognised for their contribution to the pupils' development. Such events represent 'collective compassion capabilities' (Kanov et al., 2004; Madden et al., 2012) that are a recurrent achievement rooted within the relational work of teachers and LSAs, which is all the more impressive for being set within the structural toxicities of the PRU.

The staff at the PRU do not match the reified portrayal of early years teachers as 'Mary Poppins' writ large; imagery which 'keep certain truths about the teacher undisturbed' (Kitching, 2009). It has been widely recognised that for teachers to maintain a professional demeanour takes work in the presentation of self, especially in the context of the performativity culture that now prevails (Price et al., 2012; Taggart, 2011). Nevertheless, mostly, the imagery of the kind and caring teacher is maintained. In contrast, some of the portrayals of the staff interactions at the PRU are unnerving to read. Staff at the PRU may present differently to the normalised images of early years teachers, yet they hold the same 'moral seriousness' attributed to the profession (Taggart, 2011).

Conclusion

As the short stories presented in this article display, daily interactions at the PRU, many of which seem insignificant, are in fact important relational processes that are meaningful, offering in their own way support and compassion. Further, they represent on-going reflections and evaluations of teachers' commitments to established practices and pupils in a harsh and unpredictable work environment. Rather than constraining the expression of frustration, anxiety and anger, the teachers and LSAs in this study create and maintain an emotional ecology in which trust, mutual reciprocity and shared meanings enable them to openly express it and in doing so create opportunities for compassion to emerge.

Through the lens of relational work, it is revealed that toxicity is prevalent in the PRU; it emerges from a system that produces the intense conditions in which teachers and LSAs work and then leaves them to pick up the pieces. What insights into life at the PRU have shown is that within different organisational and relational arenas, toxicity and compassion are integral to relational work. Toxicity is experienced in different ways by teachers through their unique but shared understandings and commitments to each other, the occupation and pupils. It is apparent that the conversations and relationships are infused with levels of intimacy that are established over many years and maintained through on-going re-affirmation via the 'perceptions of another person's empathic reactions' (Bandelj, 2015: 238).

Relational work contextualises different expressions of compassion as embedded in material conditions that foster or inhibit its emergence and shapes how it is expressed and shared. Enactments of toxicity and compassion reflect not only a person's position in the formal and informal hierarchies within occupational communities or work groups but their position within the large and enduring social structures of inequality. Paradoxically, within workplaces such as the PRU featured here, we are likely to find that integral to the relational work teachers engage in are narratives of compassion that are steeped in toxicity. Indeed, staff swear, shout and generally continually bully each other into compassionate action. However, these emotional ecologies, and the compassion

capabilities they foster, tend to be defined by dedicated and passionate professionals who continue to deal with the fall out of a divided and unequal society. Staff experience emergent compassion and create compassion strategies despite the PRU's embeddedness in structural toxicities of neglect, under-funding and ignorance.

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Notes

1. The descriptive term now used is ‘good’
2. LSAs (Learning Support Assistants) are generally people from the local community. The majority are women. It is not an occupation recognised for its skill content, though some LSAs are working their way through the NVQ levels, and is poorly rewarded with the average pay of the LSAs being barely above the minimum wage.

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