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emotional literacy training for educators: developing the whole person – linking hearts and minds in all learners

Abstract

During the twenty two years I have run my counselling and psychotherapy practice and conducted regular training sessions on emotional competency development, the most predominant issue I have come across is a lack of self-esteem. Of all the people I have seen in that time as individual clients, in therapeutic groups or as training course participants, at least 90% said that they felt that lack of self-esteem had contributed significantly to their experiencing a poorer quality of life and had stopped them taking up good opportunities that came their way because they undervalued or under estimated themselves so much. This sparked my interest in the subject, not least because it was an area where I struggled too in my early days. Feeling 'valuable, worthy and wonderful' most of the time was a state I could only dream of in those days! I had a sense that it was a key to experiencing a far better quality of life. The following article summarizes my journey.

The core conditions for human growth

Over the years I have focused more and more on the work of developing self-esteem and have done a lot of research on the work that had been done on this in the United States, particularly the early work conducted by Stanley Coopersmith in 1967. This is in addition to my own research projects on the most effective ways to develop self-esteem with children who have had a wide range of special needs. I was very struck by Coopersmith's findings on the conditions that underpinned the development of self esteem, namely that children:

- i. are cared for by someone who loves and likes them - and who can express this;

- ii. are given clearly defined boundaries which are consistently held; and,
- iii. are given the opportunity to take an active part in decision making.

These seemed to me to be very concrete expressions of the core conditions for human growth defined by Carl Rogers, originator of person-centred therapy and an esteemed educator. Self-esteem therefore seemed to evolve in response to being shown love and appreciation which means being treated with empathy, genuineness and respect. I could see with my clients and trainees how it flowered in environments where the individual was physically and emotionally safe. I also knew from these clients that their new insights into their emotional life and the skills they were developing, such as active

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listening, negotiating and mediation skills, were having a profound influence in their homes and workplaces.

I could see how people's hearts were activated and nourished and that everybody could flourish if the environment provided at least those basic core conditions. It seemed to me that after that came the need to stimulate and activate the mind through providing special experiences, events, tools, training and stimulation in particular mixtures designed to develop each unique child whatever their needs might be. If we begin like this with children, we seem to have a better than average chance of helping them have hearts that are open and engaged, have minds that are open and stimulated, stay eager to keep learning, and reach maturity as well-rounded and hopefully happy individuals.

Igniting the hearts and minds of Educators is the key

This, almost accidental, specialism in self-esteem development lead me to work a great deal with parents and teachers, helping them become knowledgeable and skilled in creating these core conditions in their everyday lives with the children they were caring for. I have now worked with a great variety of educators and their children, from Early Years workers in nurseries and playgroups, to specialists in pupil referral units, to teachers in secure units, primary school teachers and secondary school tutors and the importance of the emotional climate that is created around children has been borne out time and again over the years. I have seen children calm down as a result of being approached with respect, genuineness and empathy. I have seen others revitalised as they are treated with care and consistency and I have seen children with wild behaviour transform

themselves into the most responsible leaders in the groups through being given firm boundaries and a part to play in decision-making. What I have felt most moved and excited by is that the igniting (or rekindling) of a passionate heart and a questing mind in the educators themselves can lead to critical differences in the emotional environment for a child. This is what can create those core conditions that every child needs as the foundation for the life time journey to fulfilling their potential.

Next come the skills of self-management and tuning into other people

However, I have also come to believe that there is more to it than that. The creation of these core conditions and the provision of consistent boundaries and of many opportunities to learn and develop the mind are the foundation. After that comes teaching young people social and emotional management skills.

What these core conditions seem to me to create is the start of emotional understanding and management. Until that safe, psychological space is created where the child feels respected and understood, there is no chance for them to do the inner listening that needs to happen as children become attuned to the language of their physical states and emotional changes - and which allows their self-awareness to blossom. Similarly, until the environment exists where they can exercise some power and be responded to with genuineness and trust, they cannot find the emotional flexibility to develop empathy for another person and experiment with ways in which two people or more can work out what they need and find a way for both to feel happy with the arrangement. In short, they cannot steadily absorb the skills of communication and nego-

tiation, or the subtleties of knowing themselves well enough to manage their own energy states without the right environment. But once they have that environment, they must be taught the steps and skills involved in knowing, liking and respecting themselves and other people — emotional maturity does not come automatically.

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Literacy

This thought leads me to the next interesting twist in the road, which is in the emergence of the concepts of Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Literacy. These have emerged over the last 6 years largely, I believe, in response to the book written by Daniel Goleman; *'Emotional Intelligence, why it can matter more than IQ'*. It was a book that captured the imaginations of a great many people and seemed to capture the mood of the moment. It seemed to sum up and validate a great deal of what we intuitively knew was true about emotions and emotional states, and how they and a person's ability to understand and manage them could make an enormous difference to that person's ability to perform. Here was a collection of research-based evidence for the influence and importance of emotional life that spelt out why this is so.

The concepts themselves had been around for much longer; for instance the term Emotional Intelligence had been coined by Peter Salovey and Jack Meyer in the late eighties as they began research on what made people successful in certain roles. The term 'Emotional Literacy' was even older, having been used by Claude Steiner since the 1980's and first introduced in an article in 1984. Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences developed in the 1980's and published in his fascinating book *'Frames of*

Mind' in 1985 had included Personal Intelligences that described abilities to relate to one's self and to other people. But now these terms have become part of everyday language and have given depth to the previous 'life skills' and communication skills courses that have been run. They also have enabled us to place a great deal more focus on what Howard Gardner has called the Intrapersonal Intelligence as a cornerstone of Emotional Intelligence, whereas previously much more had been done to develop the interpersonal and social development of children. This is where the overlap with self-esteem development seems to me to lie. For as long as the programmes only concentrated on social skills and omitted or under emphasised the self-awareness and self-management component, truly well rounded, self-esteeming individuals would not emerge.

Potential and Practice

As I conceptualise it, Emotional Intelligence is the potential we have to be aware of, understand, appropriately express and manage emotional states in ourselves and other people. Emotional Literacy is the practice of doing all of these things. We are literate in our ability to read emotional signs and symbols. My particular interest is in Emotional Literacy. I think we all have a great deal of potential to be personally and interpersonally intelligent, the thing that makes the difference is whether we practise it on an everyday basis and develop it.

What is happening now?

Much work is being done now developing and trialling programmes and materials designed to develop Emotional Intelligence

in children. They are finding natural homes in the PSHE (Personal, Social, Health Education) and Citizenship curricula in schools. However we have also found that many teachers are worried about not being able to handle some of the emotional issues that arise. Circle Time, for instance, has become a very popular and helpful format in classrooms to support the development of Emotional Literacy and self-esteem. The students tend to enjoy it and so do the teachers until the safe and supportive environment that they have created begins to allow some difficult emotions to surface. Then they are unsure about how to handle them, wary of trying to be counsellors and perhaps doing more harm than good, yet wanting to acknowledge the one child in a large group of other children who also want their turn. At a recent conference I was asked a great deal about the distinction between good teaching practice (which encourages self-reflection and higher order thinking and which creates a warm and supportive learning environment where pupils are responded to individually as well as part of the group), therapeutic teaching and teaching Emotional Literacy. For me the distinctions lie in the level of emotional need in the pupil. That is what dictates whether the intervention of choice will be:

- focused individualised work to support their learning and development, which could be counselling;
- or a therapeutic focus in a teaching environment using counselling skills as part of the teaching repertoire;
- or a good social and emotional skills programme run in an Emotionally Literate way by an Emotionally Literate adult;
- or a combination.

The vital skill I think that educators need to have is the ability to assess that emotional need in the child, and then to devise the intervention that will be best for them within the

constraints of the educational situation. There are some excellent materials and programmes being developed, but I still believe that the key to these being effective lies with the educator or adult providing them.

Post Graduate Certificate in Emotional Literacy Development

Over the years I have done this work and particularly over the last three years as I have run courses for parents and educators at Bristol University, I have come to believe two things more and more strongly.

Firstly, that the body of information that has come to be called Emotional Literacy is a vitally important part of the school experience and curriculum (and, even better, part of the home experience too). For example, it is critical to the development of sound self-esteem. Secondly, that the best way to make this the case is through the professional and personal development of the adults who live and work with the children we want to teach. The teachers and parents who attend my courses all ask for MORE.....

They want to know how they can become proficient in emotional competence development without necessarily being counsellors or psychotherapists. That is why I have now developed the Post graduate Certificate in Emotional Literacy Development for educators, which is about to be followed early next year by the Open Studies Certificate in Emotional Literacy for parents. We will be running these at Bristol University from October 2001 and have plans to run them at Southampton University in 2002. It is seen as a vital strategy for Southampton's city wide Emotional Literacy initiative. The Institute for Emotional Literacy in Portugal is also planning to run this Certificate.

What it involves

The Post Graduate Certificate takes 11 contact days over a period of nine to ten months, some distance learning and an Action Learning Project. This project allows the participants to make what they have been learning real and to get to grips with the difficulties and delights of teaching, modelling and living Emotional Literacy. The course covers the background to the field, the neurophysiology of emotions and the connection with learning, assessing aspects of Emotional Literacy and Self-esteem, the skills involved, and the applications of social and emotional education to central issues such as inclusion, mental health, special needs and citizenship. We have had a variety of people applying for the course from primary teachers to counsellors who want to work within a school context, to secondary teachers and playworkers in pupil referral units and play schemes.

Note: If anyone is interested in talking with me more about Emotional Literacy or learning more about the Certificate please contact Elizabeth Morris on:
elizabeth@schoolofemotional-literacy.com

References

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Claude Steiner, (1984). *Emotional Literacy Transactional Analysis Journal*, 14, 162-173.

Recommended book:

Peter Sharp, (2001). *Nurturing Emotional Literacy*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

The School of Emotional Literacy is based in Gloucestershire and works with schools and educational training institutions throughout the UK. The Principal, Elizabeth Morris, specialises in emotional intelligence assessment and emotional literacy training and is a psychologist, accredited counsellor, registered psychotherapist and educator. She has worked in this field for the last twenty years and has run emotional competence programmes and professional training courses for schools, teachers, parents and children during this time. Her programmes are run in conjunction with the University of Bristol. She is currently working as an external consultant to Southampton City Council Education Services in their mission to become an Emotionally Literate city.

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