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Emotional literacy in the primary classroom: teacher perceptions and practices

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Despite a large amount of research into the impact of improved emotional literacy (EL) on various outcomes in pupils, there have been few studies exploring the perspectives of teachers. In this exploratory case study of a primary school in the north-west of England, which incorporated questionnaires and interviews with teachers, focus groups with pupils and classroom observations, we sought to explore teachers' perceptions of what constitutes emotional literacy, how this is practiced and modelled in the classroom, what factors influenced the development of EL initiatives and their perceptions of the benefits of improved EL. Key themes that emerged from the data are presented and discussed in the context of developing emotional literacy in schools.

Keywords: emotional literacy; teacher perceptions; pupil perceptions

Introduction

The terms 'emotional intelligence' (EI) and 'emotional literacy' (EL) have become buzzwords in the fields of education and psychology in recent years. The former was popularised by Goleman (1995) after being coined by Salovey and Mayer (1990). Debate around the nature and definition of EI and its status as an 'intelligence' (see Humphrey et al. 2007, for discussion) has led to the adoption of the latter term, emotional literacy, as a common alternative among researchers and practitioners alike (Kelly et al. 2004). Although there are salient arguments for the differentiation of these terms (e.g. Weare and Gray 2003), we feel that there is a need to arrive at a common conceptual definition, if only because there is not enough clear evidence that they describe qualitatively different ideas. Furthermore, if progress is to be made in this area, there is a distinct need to adopt a common language that researchers and practitioners can adhere to. Thus, although in this article we refer to 'emotional literacy', we do not distinguish between this term and 'emotional intelligence'. In defining emotional literacy, we draw upon the work of Morris and Scott (2002a), who suggest that it is the practice of:

- Noticing emotions, including early signs of feelings and sensations
- Paying attention to them
- Giving them significance
- Thinking about and understanding them, and
- Taking them into account in deciding how to act.

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These ideas are in line with other definitions that have been offered (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1995; Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham 2004). In a similar vein to other authors (e.g. Morris and Scott 2002b; Weare 2003), we stress that emotional literacy refers to schools and cultures as well as to pupils within schools.

Among the key reasons for the exponential increase in interest in emotional literacy within education are the purported benefits for pupils, both in terms of academic performance and of prevention, health and well-being (e.g. Romasz, Kantor and Elias 2004). However, the research base supporting such claims, for academic performance at least, is inconsistent at best (Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews 2002; Humphrey et al. 2007). For instance, Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham (2004) found, using a structural equation modelling approach, that emotional literacy moderated the relationship between cognitive ability and performance. In a similar vein, Gumora and Arsenio (2002) found that aspects of emotional literacy (e.g. regulation of emotions) significantly contributed to grade-point averages of middle school students, over and above the contribution made by cognition-related abilities. In contrast, Barchard (2003) found that measures of emotional literacy were unable to add significantly to the incremental predictive validity for academic performance over and above the contribution made by cognitive and personality variables. Adding to the uncertainty, a study by Greenberg and Kusche (2003) found no differences in reading or mathematics achievement between a group of elementary school students who had been taught using the PATHS curriculum (Promoting Alternative Thinking Skills, a curriculum whose aim is to promote social and emotional learning) and a comparison group.

The research evidence relating to the impact of improved emotional literacy on prevention, health, well-being and adjustment is more straightforward. 'Prevention' in this context refers to reducing risks of substance abuse, mental health problems and delinquency (Kam, Greenberg and Walls 2003). Health, well-being and adjustment is therefore intertwined with the prevention process; in reducing the risk of maladaptive behaviours, educators simultaneously provide opportunities for adaptive personal growth. Examples of the useful preventative qualities of improved emotional literacy abound. For example, Kam, Greenberg and Walls (2003) report on a controlled trial that highlighted the success of the PATHS curriculum in reducing problem behaviours and depressive symptoms in children with special educational needs, even at 2-year follow-up. Reporting on three experimental studies, Kusche (2002) further supports this general pattern of findings. Likewise, Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham (2004) found EI measures to be negatively associated with truancy and exclusions in a sample of 650 secondary school children.

Although there exists a large body of research on emotional literacy in education, much of the current evidence base (including all of the studies cited in the preceding two paragraphs) comprises context-neutral experimental and quasi-experimental studies. Whilst useful and methodologically rigorous, such research tells us little about the contexts in which emotional literacy is promoted, or indeed the processes and challenges that influence the success of initiatives within schools. The few in-depth qualitative studies in this field (e.g. Kelly et al. 2004) have been enlightening, demonstrating the importance of factors such as the overall school ethos in the success of emotional literacy ventures in schools. As one teacher in Kelly et al.'s (2004) study stated: 'It should ... fit with the school ethos or it risks not being understood or appreciated' (p. 231). This is supported by Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews (2002), who note that without an overall, 'top-down' commitment, emotional literacy can often be received sceptically by educators, who may see it as beyond the primary remit of schools.

Another feature of the existing research corpus on emotional literacy is that it predominantly focuses on pupils (Humphrey et al. 2007). Studies exploring the role of the

teacher in promoting emotional literacy are, by contrast, few and far between. This is in stark contrast to the widely accepted view that teachers are ‘significant others’ in pupils’ lives (Humphrey 2003). As Wentzel (2002) states: ‘It is likely that teachers can have a much greater influence on students’ motivation and behaviour displayed in their classrooms than parents’ (p. 297). Therefore when developing emotional literacy in the classroom, it is the teachers who are the most significant ‘significant other’; for instance, it is teachers who need to model good interpersonal behaviours, such as calmness, respect and rapport (Gordon and Turner 2001).

Aims of the current study

In light of the limitations and gaps in the knowledge base highlighted above, the current study was undertaken with the primary aim of providing a qualitative investigation of the role of teachers in promoting emotional literacy. More specifically, the research questions that drove our study were:

- (1) What do teachers perceive an emotionally literate teacher to be?
- (2) How do teachers’ values and beliefs influence their emotional literacy?
- (3) How do teachers demonstrate emotional literacy in the classroom?
- (4) How does an emotionally literate teacher foster emotional literacy in his/her pupils?
- (5) What factors influence the development of emotional literacy in schools?
- (6) What are the perceived benefits of an emotionally literate school?

Research design

In our attempts to provide answers to the research questions above, we adopted a case-study design, with a single primary school in the north-west of England as our case unit. The rationale for using a case study as the over-arching methodological approach is as follows. First, the use of a case study reflects the exploratory nature of the research; as Leedy and Ormrod (2001) suggest: ‘case study may be especially suitable for learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation’ (p. 149). Secondly, a case study allows a greater degree of external (or ‘ecological’) validity than do other methodological approaches (such as experiments) (Willig 2001). Thirdly, the case-study approach utilises various methods of data collection, allowing integration of information from various sources (triangulation), increasing the richness of data collected and enhancing the validity and credibility of findings.

Berry Grove Primary School

Berry Grove Primary School (the name has been changed to ensure anonymity) is a larger than average primary school with 407 pupils, situated in what is deemed to be a middle-class area in the north-west of England. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average. There are 32 (8.1%) pupils on the school’s special educational needs (SEN) register, of whom 9 (2.2%) have statements of SEN. At a recent OfSTED (Office for Standards in Education) inspection, the quality of education at Berry Grove was deemed excellent, leading to well above average progress. In addition, the personal development of pupils and relationships throughout the school were deemed to

be very good. The school's leadership and management were also commended in the inspection report. In the past, staff at the school have been involved in a number of emotional literacy training workshops.

Data collection methods

As is standard in case-study research, we made use of multiple data collection methods, as follows. A questionnaire for teachers was designed to obtain information regarding the teachers' current knowledge of and attitudes towards the promotion of emotional literacy in the classroom. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended questions, and was piloted with a small number of staff before being refined and distributed to all teaching staff who had agreed to participate in the project.

The questionnaires were followed up by semi-structured interviews with teachers. The use of interviews allowed for more in-depth discussion of pertinent issues that arose from the questionnaire results.

Focus groups of pupils were carried out after the above stages to add an important element of triangulation (in terms of both method and participants) to the research. Classroom observation of teachers and pupils was the final stage of the research, carried out with the aim of gathering 'live', naturally occurring data to support the data yielded by the other research methods.

Table 1 provides an overview of the number of participants who originally consented to be involved in the different stages of the research, compared to the number who actually participated. Where there is a discrepancy between these figures it was as a result of time constraints (some interviews were not carried out because the project came to a close before they could be completed) or sample absence or attrition (a member of staff being absent or unavailable).

Analytical technique

Our data interpretation was driven by a qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring 2004). The rationale for such an approach was primarily related to the fact that we wanted our interpretations to be meaningful to the educators whose work was being explored. Thus, by creating categories drawn from our aims and research questions, we were able to connect directly with practice. Furthermore, since the research was not concerned with theory development, purely 'bottom-up' approaches (such as grounded theory; e.g. Charmaz 2003) were not considered to be appropriate. Finally, qualitative content analysis is appropriate for use with diverse data sources such as those used in the case study.

As is generally accepted practice in qualitative content analysis, our analytical procedure was characterised by the following steps. First, general categories evolved from our research questions. Following a 'pilot' analysis, the categories were revised. Revision was implemented if, for instance, a particular category failed to adequately account for a

Table 1. Details of consenting and actual participants in the study.

Stage	Questionnaire	Interview	Focus Group	Observation
Number of staff/pupils/classes willing to participate	17	16	11	13
Actual number carried out	15	11	7	5

significant proportion of the data. The final categories were then applied to the full dataset. In the discussion of categories that follows, the following abbreviations are used to identify the source of a data extract: Q = questionnaire; I = interview transcript; FG = focus group transcript.

Results

Research Questions 1 and 2

The majority of data relating to Question 1 ('What do teachers perceive an emotionally literate teacher to be?') corresponded directly to the definitions of emotional literacy provided in the major theoretical models in this area (e.g. Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1995; Petrides, Frederickson and Furnham 2004). The following extracts are typical of the dataset as a whole:

Understand and express own and others' feelings, discuss feelings honestly, and deal with them appropriately. Empathise and help others. [Q]

Ability and skill to understand one's own feelings and actions, to understand feelings and actions of others and respond accordingly. [Q]

Emotional language – express one's feelings – be aware of them and how they affect us. [Q]

In addition to these generic definitions, the teachers at Berry Grove also gave examples that connected more directly with classroom practice and their role as educators:

Appreciating and considering children's feelings. Do they feel confident and secure. Creating a comfortable environment. [Q]

These kinds of responses were given credibility by examples provided by pupils:

She's really kind, when someone is upset; she makes them feel part of the group, and tells funny jokes. When we're good, she gives the class lots of team points, and makes funny faces, she's unique. [FG]

She looks at you, and if there's a problem with someone, she talks to the other person, you just know it, and she gives you suggestions on what to do. [FG]

We now turn to Question 2 ('How do teachers' values and beliefs influence their emotional literacy?'). When asked about their values and beliefs about a child and what effect it had on their relationship, the majority of teachers acknowledged its inevitable influence, but gave examples of how they strived to minimise this:

Yes, I try not to listen to others' opinions of children, it can be misguided sometimes, every child responds to each individual differently. [I]

Yes, if I'm not careful with lower achievers, I can enforce it by the work and the way I talk. I have to keep pushing boundaries, to stop myself doing it and slotting children into levels and stereotypes. [I]

In sum, the staff questioned seemed to demonstrate a high level of awareness of emotional literacy, but recognised that the approach to working with children fostered by EL is more natural for some teachers than others (one teacher stated, 'It's human nature, I can't help it' [I]) and requires effective communication throughout the school (as one teacher

admitted, ‘I’m unsure what other staff do’). This of course links directly to Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews’ (2002) observation that there can be great variability in the level of acceptance and willingness of staff in different schools to undertake training in EL. Relating to this, it was interesting to note that whilst the majority of pupils questioned validated the responses given by staff regarding their use of emotional literacy, responses about some individual teachers did contradict the general flow:

Pupil 1: She stares at you, she never listens.

Pupil 2: Teachers always listen.

Pupil 1: No they don’t. Sometimes she ignores you, she looks at you and if she wants to listen, she does, but sometimes I can’t tell if she’s listening. [FG]

Research Questions 3 and 4

A key theme emerging from data relating to Questions 3 and 4 (‘How do teachers demonstrate emotional literacy in the classroom?’ and ‘How does an emotionally literate teacher foster emotional literacy in his/her pupils?’) was the justification of emotional literacy as a ‘legitimate’ way of working to enhance not only children’s social and emotional well-being, but also their learning and achievement:

Children can’t learn if they are worried about other things away from the classroom. Need to be able to deal with their feelings about learning and feel comfortable enough to share feelings and ideas to help own learning and that of others. [Q]

It is VITAL that all children feel secure and content in their learning environment, thus create an open door for learning. [Q]

Pupils need to feel secure, comfortable and safe in order for the brain to be receptive to learning. [Q]

These comments can be interpreted from two broad theoretical perspectives. On the one hand, they are in line with the literature on the role of emotions in learning, which suggests that negative affect can interfere with the learning process (a process known as ‘downshifting’). This perspective has gained empirical support from research into the relationship between the amygdala (the brain’s emotional centre) and the frontal lobes (where, broadly speaking, the co-ordination of learning and higher-level cognition takes place) (Sousa 2000; Humphrey et al. 2007). From an alternative perspective, they can be seen as reflecting the humanist view of education, and in particular that of Maslow (1987). Within Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, basic (‘deficiency’) needs such as those of a physiological nature (e.g. satisfying hunger and thirst) and those to do with safety (e.g. the need to feel secure, seek pleasure and avoid pain) must be met before ‘growth’ needs (such as higher learning and self-actualisation) can be addressed. From either perspective, the comments underline the teachers’ firm commitment to the notion of a positive emotional environment as central to effective learning.

In terms of the actual demonstration and fostering of emotional literacy in the classroom, a variety of strategies were elicited:

Ensuring they listen showing genuine interest, ask about their feelings. [I]

Show respect, discuss ways to be more sensitive. [I]

Giving them opportunity to talk about feelings. [I]

The comments were, by and large, validated by the data from the pupil focus groups, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

She lowers the tone of her voice, she knows if you've fallen out with your friends ... she knows everyone's personality. [FG]

However, this benign relationship was not experienced by all of the pupils questioned:

I never talk to her—I can't trust her. [FG]

Research Questions 5 and 6

Several themes emerged relating to these final two research questions ('What factors influence the development of emotional literacy in schools?' and 'What are the perceived benefits of an emotionally literate school?'). In terms of factors influencing the development of emotional literacy in schools, it was interesting to note that most of the teachers interpreted this line of questioning as being predominantly about 'barriers' rather than 'facilitators', as the following excerpts demonstrate:

Government directives and pressures, plus expectations from management and parents do not always allow EL to take place as much as possible. [Q]

Individual personalities who are not 'on board'. [Q]

People who only play lip service to it, staff, parents and pupils who damage the self-esteem of others. [Q]

Staff not fully taking the concept on board. [Q]

Willingness or otherwise of management and staff to try something new/different. [Q]

Non-cooperation of staff to encompass the whole idea of EL, unresolved conflicts, ineffective communication. [Q]

Such comments are, of course, directly in line with the findings of Kelly et al.'s (2004) study and Zeidner, Roberts and Matthews' (2002) commentary on emotional literacy. Furthermore, with particular reference to the final comment above, there is a more general concern about breaking free from traditional patterns of practice and engaging in innovation to the benefit of pupils and staff alike. This barrier to the development of emotional literacy is consistent with recent literature on expressions of inclusive practice in schools. For instance, Ainscow and his colleagues (2004) refer to the need for 'interruptions' of established understandings and practices in their discussion of the development of new, more inclusive ways of working. This kind of process has also been reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Humphrey et al. 2006).

In laying the groundwork for an emotionally literate school, there was a strong sense of the need for the wholesale adoption of an EL 'ethos':

It needs to be agreed as a focus and everything else built around it. [Q]

There's team discussion and research into it ... we make a conscious effort to be emotionally literate as individuals, teams and as the whole team. [Q]

However, even within a school like Berry Grove, which could certainly be considered as being on the pathway toward becoming an emotionally literate school, there were inherent tensions:

There is an enormous conflict with time and it affects the quality. [I]

There is not time to listen to the children talking about how they feel. [I]

This feeling of a lack of available time is, of course, nothing new in the current educational climate. However, with regard to this specific context it may represent a more deep-seated set of values in which the school curriculum and emotional literacy are considered as separate entities, resulting in EL being seen as an ‘add-on’ (leading to the conflict alluded to in the above excerpts). It is worth noting that other staff took the opposite view, in which emotional literacy is simply seen as a natural aspect of the school environment (and therefore inseparable from the curriculum):

Emotional literacy is naturally part of all lessons. [I]

If staff are working in an emotionally literate environment, this will be inherent in their teaching and work with children. [Q]

In terms of the perceived benefits of developing emotional literacy within the school, the issue of improved behaviour and classroom environment was a dominant theme:

Large impact on behaviour because they listen, and they share. We sort out problems as a class, which then leaves them ready to learn. [I]

Improves behaviour, I’m more in touch with classes’ feelings, if the class think the teacher understands, they behave better, which produces a calmer atmosphere. It affects the way I deal with behaviour problems. [I]

Great impact on behaviour, working together is a social event, which gives the children confidence in learning ability, it’s all about being happy while learning. [I]

Calm, invoke calmness in the children by language, creates an opportunity for learning. [I]

These excerpts, in addition to the data presented in the section dealing with Questions 3 and 4, demonstrate that for the teachers in this study at least, the benefits of an emotionally literate school are worth pursuing, particularly at a time when discipline in schools is such a hotly debated issue (McManus 2006).

Discussion

The word ‘emotional’ has sometimes been used to mean ‘irrational’ (Sutton and Wheatley 2003), and indeed the historical conflict between emotion and reason within education has traditionally meant that emotional aspects of learning have been neglected in favour of a purely rationalist approach to education (Humphrey et al. 2007). However, this has changed in recent years with the development of emotional literacy initiatives in schools across the world. The aim of the research reported in this article was to explore an area which had hitherto remained relatively untouched: the perspectives of teachers regarding the development of emotional literacy in schools. Although the study was small-scale and exploratory in nature (and therefore we acknowledge the inherent limitations with regard to generalisability of findings), several key issues emerged from the data collected, which we address below.

From the results of this study it is evident that the teaching staff at Berry Grove have some idea of what constitutes EL, and hence an emotionally literate teacher. According to the staff questioned it is someone who is aware of and understands their own feelings, listens to the children, can use emotive language, understands that children have feelings too and takes these into account, can empathise and provides a secure and comfortable environment for the children to learn in. This is similar to the emotionally literate teacher as described by Weare (2003), who states that emotionally literate teachers need to have high self-regard, self-knowledge and emotional awareness, and can manage their own emotions. They need to be resilient, with a high stress tolerance. Teachers need to be able to build strong relationships, with a positive attitude towards others, and inspire others to be optimistic. However, from our questionnaire results and the interviews it appears that while the relationship aspect is of prominence to the staff, there appears to be less emphasis on the teachers' self-regard, self-awareness and self-management. This is a finding which warrants further attention in future research. Indeed, two research questions follow from this. First, to what extent is it possible and desirable for schools to meet teachers' emotional needs? Secondly, if the former is possible, what factors (e.g. institutional ethos, relationships) would make it possible for teachers to become more emotionally resilient as well as possessing high levels of stress tolerance? Current government policy in the United Kingdom on social and emotional aspects of learning (e.g. Department for Education and Skills 2005) has clearly acknowledged the importance of such questions with the development of materials to address emotional literacy in the staffroom, but empirical enquiry has (to the best of our knowledge) not yet touched upon this.

Another key issue emerging from the data related to how the development of an emotionally literate school is hindered by staff who are not, in the words of one participant, 'on board'. This creates something of a dilemma, as EL cannot be imposed on people; it needs to be created through a whole-school approach (Weare 2003). Teachers need to feel that their own emotional needs are being met, otherwise it can promote cynicism and make situations worse (Weare and Gray 2003). There was also evidence to suggest that the communications and relationship between staff members in school could be improved; for example, one teacher stated, 'I'm unsure what other staff do', whilst another talked of 'unresolved conflicts' and 'ineffective communication'. This may be a starting point to engage the more dissident members of staff. It is important that there is open communication at all levels when developing an emotionally literate school (Weare 2003).

The research presented in this article has ideally gone some way toward elucidating the opportunities and challenges presented by the prospect of developing an emotionally literate school. Whilst the questions of the impact of improved emotional literacy on academic outcomes remains unanswered (and is still hotly debated), it is clear that the current emphasis on the role of emotional health and well-being in education will remain, for the time being at least. This is clearly evidenced by, for instance, policy developments in this area (e.g. Department for Education and Skills 2003; Department of Health/Department for Education and Skills 2004). It is therefore important for research to continue in this area, such that the process of moving towards emotional literacy in schools and classrooms is facilitated.

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