Emotional Literacy and the Case for a Whole-School Approach to Promote Sustainable Educational Change

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Abstract:
An emotionally literate learning environment impacts on classroom climate and builds a sense of connectedness. This has a positive effect on students' well-being which includes the ability to engage in learning and raise levels of attainment. To work towards an emotionally literate learning community a whole-school approach (ethos, curriculum and partnerships) needs to be employed. This multidimensional strategy has the potential to transform pedagogy and relationships in a responsive classroom approach, increasing the capacity for improved learning outcomes. This paper provides the rationale for a project which will enable a group of schools to use an emotional literacy framework to build change in ways that are dynamic and interactive. Schools will develop emotional literacy through explicit and implicit methods that may incorporate cross curricular links and potentially involve all facets of the school, including the school board, school executive, staff, students and parents. This three year project involves an evaluation and measurement of the intervention and process used to enable a comparative analysis of data and results. This will provide evidence as to the sustainability through qualitative and quantitative measures such as levels of bullying, absenteeism, positive change in regard to the quality of school life and perceived level of control over work.

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What is emotional literacy and why does it matter?

Emotional literacy can be defined as our ability to makes sense of and apply knowledge about our own and others' emotional states with skill and competence. (Weare, 2004, p.2). It involves self –awareness, building a sense of connectedness and trust, communication and conflict resolution skills, building healthy relationships, empathy and celebrating success at all levels. In a school community everyone is influenced by the extent of emotional literacy operating. Antidote UK provide another similar definition in saying that emotional literacy is the practice of interacting with others in a way that builds understanding of our own emotions, then using this understanding to shape our actions.

An eco-systemic view of emotional literacy recognises that the variables and the outcomes of emotional literacy interrelate and are dynamic. This view is well developed by Groundwater-Smith (2005) when she says that 'the intelligent school is a living organism, it is a dynamic system that is more than just the sum of its parts'. (P.2). A school that is attuned to emotional literacy may develop the capacity to decrease bullying, less absenteeism amongst staff and students and greater commitment to school.

The links between the cognitive and affective domains and the subsequent influence on learning are well understood today. Our emotions impact on our readiness and ability to learn. A child who does not feel valued in the classroom, becomes frustrated and distracted when attempting to learn a new concept, enters the classroom in anger or has a low level of rapport with a Mathematics teachers may find doing algebra or quadratic equations beyond what they are willing to do. What can help is to develop resilient and optimistic learners who are persistent and able to recognise how their own emotions impact on their own and others behaviour. But where can we find answers to such an array of issues? There is a range of research that can be accessed Jensen, (2000); Goleman, (1995); Nadge, (2002); Fuller, (2000); Seligman, (1995); Gardner, (1983).

Our emotions are at the core of who we are, why we behave the way we do and who we want to become, whether this is in five minutes or at some point in our life time. Ladd (2003) To understand our emotions and how the affective domain develops is just as important as academic results and performance. People such as Goleman, (1995); Zins et el, (2004); Cohen, (1999); Elias et el, (2003) would argue that what really makes a difference to well-being and relationships is a person's ability to develop social and emotional skills.

This type of thinking about emotions in regard to education is not entirely new however. The famous philosopher, Aristotle, who lived around 384 BC, believed that the aim of education had to be to help people to become fully human otherwise it was pointless. Whilst this takes into consideration a range of factors it can well be argued that being more fully human involves an understanding of oneself and ones emotions as a base from which to move forward.

In 1994 Daniel Goleman stated in a report on the current state of emotional literacy in the U.S;

> "...in navigating our lives, it is our fears and envies, our rages and depressions, our worries and anxieties that steer us day to day. Even the most academically brilliant among us are vulnerable to being undone by unruly emotions. The price we pay for emotional literacy is in failed marriages and troubled families, in stunted social and work lives, in deteriorating physical health and mental anguish and, as a society, in tragedies such as killings..." (p.1)

The point here is that emotions matter and in effect do determine the quality of relationships. In terms of the classroom and learning relationships are paramount. This means between teacher and student, student and student, executive and teacher and school and the community.

This feeling of being safe is important in the classroom and within the school environment. The following quotation by a student clearly describes some of the factors that contribute to emotional safety.

> 'Emotional safety means seeing a smile on my teacher's face the first day of school instead of a list of rules that is taller than by arm is long. It means being able to use the word "Neanderthal" instead of "caveman" and not be made fun of because my vocabulary is too big. It means being able to go through the lunch line without fear of somebody grabbing my money or my cupcake. It means having a teacher who hands back papers privately instead of reading grades out loud as I pick up my test. Emotional safety is unconditional acceptance of me. Emotional safety, first and foremost, allows me to wear my natural face instead of a fake one ......' (Bluestein, 2001, p.8)

A safe learning environment is crucial to students taking risks in their learning, asking questions even if they think they might be silly ones, going to see a teacher or wanting to be in a particular subject.

A mandate for a comprehensive approach to emotional literacy

A mandate currently exists for substantial work in emotional literacy. This is in the form of a number of Australian Government documents that schools need to comply with. For each document there are elements contained within it which rely on emotional literacy. This means more than an awareness of emotional literacy but using the concept proactively to achieve certain measures outlined in the documents. These government documents are *The National Goals for Schooling* the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, *The National Safe Schools Framework and the School Leadership Capability Framework.*

The National Goals for Schooling include the goal that when students complete school they should have the qualities of self-confidence, optimism, high self –esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence as a basis for their potential life role as family, community and workplace members. (Goal 1.2) It also states that

students should have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics, and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives, and to accept responsibility for their own actions. (Goal 1.3)

A person who demonstrates high levels of emotional literacy will reflect on their interactions with others, be aware of how individual responses influence others and manage set backs and challenges. Greenberg (2003) an advocate of social emotional learning sees high-quality education as enabling young people to act in socially skilful, respectful ways; to practice positive, safe, and healthy behaviours and like the above stated goals provides the basis for future roles that the individual will undertake in regard to competencies and work habits. He also sees as vital a coordinated program of academic, social and emotional learning.

Within the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* nine values are articulated. These include care and compassion, respect, responsibility, a fair go, understanding, tolerance and inclusion. Emotional literacy involves developing such values as each of them is relational and does exist in a vacuum but rather within a social context. Therefore to develop these values a social context meaningful to young people needs to be used otherwise they can appear as motherhood statements lacking rigour and intellectualisation. Vardy (2005) regards the need to develop these through ethical dilemmas and philosophical dilemmas as a vehicle that is relevant and necessary. These might be through health issues such as sexuality, drug use and road use relationships, genetic engineering and spirituality.

Liau et el (2003) supports the value of emotional literacy as the driver in moral and civic education. Clearly if school communities are going to focus on what they believe, what they feel and what they think must be the key to this process.

Teaching values in student- centered and interactive ways can give students a voice and build resilience by enabling them to build a range of support networks and coping strategies. It is also very much part of mental health and health promotion and therefore can be empowering for young people. When emotional literacy is the basis of this work it will provide a foundation of skills that staff and students can apply not only to building positive relationships at school, but also in managing each health issue that they encounter on a daily basis.

Rowling (2005) highlights how emotional literacy is an important underpinning of mental health which is about capacity building and sustainability. This is actually empowering for people and enables them to see hope in desperate situations and to be calm when they need to even if surrounded by chaos. It provides the capacity for individuals within groups and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well being, optimal development and the use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational) and achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice. (Australian Health Ministers 1991)

The National Safe Schools Framework addresses the four key issues of bullying, harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect. The framework endeavours to help school communities build and maintain a supportive learning environment in which all students can feel safe. Whilst Australian schools are amongst the safest environments in our society issues such as bullying can result in long term psychological effects. So how does emotional literacy meet the agenda here? Best practice in bullying for example, involves whole school approaches that include strategies such as problem solving, rehearsal, role play, empathy building, restorative justice, use of graphics and pictures to initiate discussion, a method of shared concern and mediation. The effectiveness of each of these approaches relies on the level of emotional literacy of those involved.

One simple yet highly effective strategy for identifying the way students feel about school is to use the 'Terrible-Delighted Faces Test' developed by Andrews and Withey (1976) as reported by Rigby (2002). The test includes faces depicting expressions from a broad smile to a heavy frown. The test helps to provide a window into the level of happiness experienced and the related self-concept for students. The key point about using such a test is that it is all about emotional literacy and raising young peoples' awareness about how they are feeling.

The *School Leadership Capability Framework* includes numerous links to emotional literacy such as the need for strong interpersonal skills, resilience, advocacy building and the ability to build an environment that will maximise student learning. Building positive relationships and effective communication provide key attributes of leaders who are role models for a learning community.

The Whole School Approach
The world health organisation endorses the whole school approach to health promotion as best practice. This model involves the three key aspects of curriculum, partnerships and ethos. The curriculum covers what is taught through formal teaching programmes, the partnerships involve working with parents as stakeholders but also outside agencies such as the General Practitioner or police officer. The ethos and environment include the school culture, its symbols, traditions, policies and procedures. Someone going into a school might describe the school ethos in terms of the evidence of caring relationships and intuitive sense about the way people relate to each other.

A whole school approach results in the most effective practice and outcomes when the three areas outlined above are being targeted together rather than in silos as disparate or isolated issues. This disparate and often reactive approach is one that is often used by schools as a series of short term interventions which have different focus areas and are not linked in any way. Elias et el (2003) Some schools use 'emotional bandaid' as a means of moving through an array of health issues influencing student wellbeing, rather than developing a holistic approach whereby all layers and dimensions of the school have been permeated. There is evidence that short term interventions have short term outcomes and are not necessarily sustainable. Greenberg et el (2003) One-off approaches often follow a serious incident such as a fatality, misuse of alcohol or an in jury and are reactive rather than proactive.

Rowling (2005) suggests that we need to rethink our process when undertaking a whole school approach or it can result in segregating areas such as developing a curriculum, writing a policy and organising a parent night. This approach could be again a tick-a-box approach whereby schools isolate, allocate and re-locate. Rather Rowling asserts that priorities are implemented through a range of linked strategies and progress is reviewed continuously through a process of collaboration, coordination, consolidation and revision. This suggests a seamless and dynamic approach rather than one that is lock step and reductionist.

The need for emotional literacy applies to all dimensions of a school from the School Board, the Principal and school executive down to middle managers, staff and students. Within a school many different groups can be identified such as faculty groups, pastoral and welfare teams, class groups, staff groups, individual students and parents. Whilst working with staff is a key process it may be possible to also work concurrently with other groups to develop emotional literacy.

When emotional literacy is developed through a whole-school approach and has a high priority across a full range of contexts this will impact on what happens in the classroom. In this situation students will feel more able to ask teachers for help, they will be engaged in their work and focused on learning goals rather than their performance. Teachers who model what they are teaching about in emotional literacy are more likely to see the students doing what the teachers are teaching.

Interactions with parents and the community are also enhanced by emotionally literate practices Roffey (2002) (2004). Where schools are able to focus on competence and possibility in difficult situations rather than seek blame they raise not only the confidence of families to work with the school but also the confidence of parents to develop more effective relationships with their children This requires a high level of interpersonal skill.

If emotional literacy permeates all layers and dimensions of the school students will begin to develop a personal approach to emotional literacy. This will enable students to make sense of skills and competencies that are common to problem-solving and personal and social skills across a range of issues such as mental health, sexual health and positive relationships. Policies and procedures are needed that are congruent to what is taught in a class, observed in the playground and in every school interaction and discussed in a staffroom. Therefore a whole school approach can help ensure that there is congruence across a whole range of agendas within a school.

Building Protective Factors through Emotional Literacy

Using emotional literacy as a common base can enhance protective factors and build resilience. It can also build on the work promoted through the National *MindMatters* project. This can be done through focusing on whole school approaches that enhance a sense of belonging, build a positive school climate, encourage and develop pro-social peer groups, advocate required helpfulness, seek out and utilise opportunities for success and recognition of achievement and advance norms against violence Australian Government (2000).

Schools that are able to build students' protective factors are providing students with a reduced risk of many high risk behaviours such as early experimentation with drugs, violent and anti-social behaviour and bullying. It can enhance mental health and promote a more positive self –concept. Developing skills in emotional literacy can be a turning point for a young person faced with adversity or a challenge.

Often schools focus on students as the first and only measure for an intervention however research supports the notion that the best place to start is with staff Weare (2004); Pasi (2001). Therefore, one possible approach would begin with staff identifying effective ways to cope and manage change, celebrate success and enable staff to model effective means of communication. Central to this would be the awareness of ones' own emotions and the emotions of colleagues and students and how these affect interactions on all levels.

Work with staff needs to be on-going and central to any work that occurs with students as the health of the helper is a key component. Holmes (2005) recognises the importance for teachers in appreciating the power that emotions have in a person's life and describes the importance of finding ways to appropriately express emotions as a means of maintaining emotional wellbeing.

In terms of students it involves identifying opportunities for success and recognition of achievement either through academic or co-curricular programs, involving students in ways that they can be helpful through involvement in the local-school community and in the classroom through mentoring or enabling the student to take on the role of leader during the using of an information communication technology activity can be empowering for students.

Finding ways for students to participate and believe they are making a difference is another vital component to building a sense of connectedness. This can be through formal channels such as a Student Representative Council or class prefects and the Peer Support Program but it but can also be through informal channels whereby students believe they are listened to and valued as a member of a class. The notion of service learning is an important dimension too as it provides students with the opportunity to reflect on the lives of other people and to develop empathy. This may involve travelling overseas to participate in a community project or being actively involved in a community very different to that experienced by the student on a daily basis.

Promoting a sense of belonging through tradition, ritual, games, time out, celebrating birthdays and remembering special occasions and group bonding activities along with the use of every day curtesies and developing an interest in students and staff as people can build connectedness. Another key factor is providing students with choice. Horsch (2002) believes giving students a choice at school helps build a sense of ownership and commitment in regard to the learning process. This could be in relation to the topic, the method of presentation, the time taken or the nature of the learning environment. This notion of choice aligns itself well with that of the student voice as articulated by Arnold (2000). She believes that students voices need to be heard across all subjects both literally and metaphorically.

Teaching for and about Emotional Literacy

Further to this Arnold (2005) asserts that quality relationships are the foundations of excellent pedagogy. Weare (2000) describes how significant teacher expectations are on the behaviour and attainment of young people. Praising some students and not others and increased verbal interactions will others does impact on learning outcomes. It seems that students who participate in higher levels of conversation about their learning with teachers achieve better results. The NSW Quality Teaching Model has as one of it's key components a quality environment. This is involves high levels of social support and reinforcement so that students of all ability levels feel valued and safe.

Schools that teach for emotional literacy can do so through pedagogy, application of theory and the use of teaching strategies. This may include cooperative learning, group work, jigsaws, the six thinking hats and Positive-Minus-Interesting. Metacognitive practices such as the use of the left-hand page to enable students to make sense of what is being taught and making it meaningful and guided visualisation are also useful strategies. Approaches such as constructivsm whereby students make meaning through a social construct that involves inquiry problem solving give learning meaning for students so that they can build new knowledge into pre-existing knowledge. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development requires a teachers' understanding of the type of interaction and level of scaffolding that a student needs to achieve a task in a particular context. This requires a high level of care and understanding of the student involved.

Understanding the range of ways that a student learns and applying it by offering a range of teaching strategies that are visual, auditory and kinaesthetic will engage students and making learning meaningful. When this happens students will feel positive about what they are doing, particularly when given the opportunity to for example 'talk their way to understanding'. The application of learning styles should be used prudently. This is to say that students should not be categorised or reduce their learning options to one learning style. There are several reasons for this. One is that different tasks will illicit different preferred learning styles, the need for students to experience and develop through the full range of learning styles and the fact that much of what is rewarded through examinations of the formal academic programme is verbal/linguistic intelligence.

Weare (2004) emphasises the importance of whole brain learning to encourage new associations of ideas, bringing together information in new ways and considering problems of different perspectives. Other ongoing strategies such as circle time can provide a new approach to the way students perceive each other and themselves. Weare, (2000); Antidote, (2003). Circle time is just that, students sit in a circle and participate in an array of activities. This could range from think-pair-share to rotating chairs and discussion to problem based activities, or simply getting to know other people. These types of activities can effectively develop empathy and an understanding of oneself and others. Emotional literacy can develop key communication and conflict resolution skills with an emphasis on one of many contexts such as ethics, morality and spirituality Antidote, (2003).

Social and emotional skills can be taught explicitly but are also covered in schools implicitly through the use of stories, narrative, moral dilemmas, role plays, cartoons, pictures, hypothetical situations, scenarios, every day happenings and case studies. Teaching about emotional literacy can be done through an overt program in a particular subject or through a pastoral care program whereby students make the connection betweens thoughts, emotions and behaviours and reflect on their emotions through a full range of student –centered experiences. This can be supplemented through across Key Learning Areas strategies.

If such a program can be revisited each year so that the notion of a spiral curriculum is used in conjunction with a cross curriculum approach students would be able to make the connection between what is taught and therefore be more likely to be able to transfer it to a range of issues. A simple yet effective strategy that could be incorporated into every class is key questions such as;

- 'How do you feel about what we have learnt and how we learnt it?'
- 'How will these emotions affect you when you leave here?'
- 'How would you rate the success of your learning? How could you best demonstrate this '

If such reflective questions are used regularly in different ways this can enhance students' self-knowledge and enable students to become active participants in their learning. These practices are aligned to the new Board of Studies Assessment for Learning approach which involves self-assessment. With guidance students would be able to identify the effects of blockers such as fear, frustration and anger. Through building a classroom climate of respect and responsibility students can be encouraged to take risks as a learner and to understand that when there is a struggle to understand or make sense of something that results can be very rewarding if they are willing to be persistent.

A further approach to developing emotioanl literacy is to adopt practices within an Academic Care framework. Academic Care enhances student learning, well-being and resilience through pedagogies sympathetic to student needs, and embedded in learning experiences. This is a construct that can guide schools interested in maximising the potential of the classroom to build protective factors. Research shows a strong need for all teachers to better understand their pastoral role and its impact on student learning and well-being Nadge, (2002); Scott, (2001); Cheers, (2003).It encourages continuing discourse to promote the integration of pastoral and academic domains of all schools.

Aligned to this construct are a raft of structures and approaches that support student learning and wellbeing. This ranges from mentoring to case work, the quality of explicit feedback provided to students about how to get to the next level, advice about subject choices, follow up with students following reports, conferencing with students and parents about learning goals and work samples, the method used and priorities given to accommodate students' choice of elective subjects and co-curricular activities. Counselling a student individually before returning particularly if a student thought the work was of a high standard but did not eventuate that way may enable a student to discuss what to do next time and deal with the issue in a caring and considerate manner.

Other approaches include the Responsive Classroom approach that focuses on morning meeting, rules and consequences, guided discovery, classroom organisation, and assessment and reporting to parents. This approach involves the elements working alone and together to help students to develop the social skills of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control and also to promote in them a deeper knowledge of academic subjects to build motivation and informed decision making Charney, Clayton & Wood (1995) reported by Horsch (2002).

As outlined above key aspects of a teaching program to build emotional literacy include self-awareness, empathy and persistence, managing feelings, self-motivation and social skills. Appreciation of self and others would key along with building a sense of belonging or connectedness, confidence, competence and celebrating contributions.

The Way Forward

A group of schools will begin work on a project to provide baseline-data about the level of emotional literacy operating in their schools and how to further develop it. Built into the process will be measurement of outcomes such as level of bullying, attainments, success through behaviour management, self-concept, resilience, well being and the quality of relationships. This will involve a coordinated whole school approach that involves both qualitative and quantitative measures is will include the use of an audit to gage which areas provide opportunities to do further work and are open to improvement. A school wanting to build emotional literacy will have a plethora of ways that it could move forward by focusing on one or more key groups.

For example, it may be staff and the parent group. If teachers are exhibiting signs of poor self – concept, or burn out this may present as apathy, poor communication and poor modelling for students. The attrition rate of teachers from the profession is high and there is a real need to mentor young and beginning teachers. Therefore this could be one major component of building emotional literacy both for the mentor and the mentees.

The key point to the way the project would operate is that it would be a case of working with schools not on schools. An action research model would be used involving a cycle of identifying school and community contexts, relevant issues and goals, conducting assessment of the contributing risk and protective factors, planning community action and intervention and on-going monitoring planning and evaluation over a three year period. Evaluation would take a range of forms such as focus groups, interview, journal keeping, questionnaire and the use of statistics for quantitative data. Integral to the process of development would be three major goals. These would include self awareness, emotional literacy skill development, relationship building and a focus on the positive. These three aims would help to identify ongoing opportunities to build on and celebrate success.

Schools involved would have the opportunity to share experience and reflect on their learning journey over time. This would be invaluable for principals who are often isolated in a school. The focus on school executive would enable processes such as reflection about the style of leadership used, the development of democratic and consultative management and a further articulation of the school vision. For each group identified within the framework a range of options are possible depending on school needs.

As can be seen the research process would involve all key stakeholders and provide an invaluable opportunity to build resilience and connectedness through emotional literacy. It is envisaged that two to three schools will be involved in this research. The sky is the limit given the far reaching outcomes that are realistic for such a study. This will add to the growing body of international research in the area of emotional literacy.

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