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‘Respect’ in practice – the challenge of emotional literacy in education

Sue Roffey,

SELF Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Australia

The concept of emotional literacy in education is developing as schools take on board a range of initiatives which promote constructive relationships and the knowledge and skills which underpin these.

This paper is based on qualitative studies that address the issue of respect in different ways. One explores the relationships that schools have with parents/carers, the second is an evaluation of a Circle Time initiative, and the third investigates the processes within schools to develop emotional literacy. Relationships are core in all these studies; the relationship that teachers have with parents, the relationship that teachers have with students and students have with each other and the relationship that the school executive have with their staff.

‘Respect’ is a value that is often quoted as part of mission statements in schools. This paper explores what this means to different stakeholders in a school and which practices appear to generate more effective, ‘respectful’ interactions within the school system which promote feelings of being valued. Issues of power, agency, emotional literacy and the active development of a positive ethos are addressed as integral to this understanding.

Introduction

The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools outlines nine values for Australian Schooling (DES 2005). They are presented in alphabetical order and number 7 is ‘Respect’. This is defined as ‘treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person’s point of view’.

The first part of the Values document focuses on the need to ‘build character’ in students and the ‘Guiding principles’ state how these values might be fostered and transmitted. Amongst other things ‘effective values education:

- articulates the values of the school community and applies these consistently to the school community
- occurs in partnership with students, staff, families and the school community as part of a whole school approach to educating students, enabling them to exercise responsibility and strengthening their resilience
- is presented in a safe and supportive learning environment in which students are encouraged to explore their own, their school’s and their community’s values’ (p.5)

The challenges

The above appears a laudable aim and the intention of this paper is to use data from three studies to highlight both the challenges implicit in such an endeavour and to present possibilities for addressing these challenges and identify ways forward. This is conceptualised within a systemic framework from a constructivist perspective, sometimes referred to as soft systems methodology (Checkland & Haynes, 1994; Bergvall-Kareborn, 2002), and more pro-actively as critical systems theory (Gregory, 2000). Each individual

brings with them to any situation both their personal constructs of how the world works (Burr & Butt, 1992), and the social constructs (Gergen, 1985) that determine their understanding of reality and their 'place' within it. This includes the discourses of power that position their perspective. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) make the point that the well-being of the individual is dependent on the well-being of the immediate family which in turn is contingent upon community and societal conditions. To conceptualise this within the embedded systems that comprise a school enables us to take account of the multiplicity of interactive, accumulative and circular understandings and responses that impact on outcomes at any given time. This can be articulated as alternative spirals within systems, which are either on an upward trajectory in which relationships and feelings are predominantly positive, optimistic and agentic, or on a downward path towards confusion, conflict and a sense of disempowerment. Such a downward spiral tends to reinforce negative emotions such as frustration, anger and unhappiness. There is evidence, however, (Hromek, 2004; Weare, 2003) that it is possible to intervene to reverse this spiral and build a culture that generates more positive feelings. These underpin collaborative relationships that form the basis of effective learning environments (Arnold, 2005).

Although it is acknowledged that there are multiple subjectivities within a system and one school will be very different from another the aim is to explore how stakeholders within those systems construct alternative narratives that promote optimum well-being. This includes supporting a definition and embodiment of respect which acknowledges that collective and individual well-being is interdependent, and taking account of how feelings may be constructed within the operation of these mutual relationships.

Emotional literacy

There is increasing evidence that social and emotional learning for the student body is linked to positive outcomes for academic attainment (Zins et al, 2004) and also for resilience and well-being (Brooks, 1999). Emotional intelligence is usually construed as an individual trait (Goleman, 1995), whereas a core feature of emotional literacy, noticeably in the UK (Antidote 2003), incorporates an eco-systemic analysis of relationship as described above. Individual knowledge and skills are seen as embedded within constructed contexts. Individuals and the systems in which they interact are considered mutually influential.

Weare (2003, p.61) in describing the emotionally literate school emphasises this: "We need to ensure that the techniques children learn in the classroom for communicating effectively in respectful, empathic and assertive ways are also used by all staff when dealing with children"

Antidote goes further in hoping for the influence of respectful practices at the macro level.

By letting the practice of emotional literacy grow out from our schools ... we create the possibility that emotional literacy can start to become more deeply

embedded in the wider culture... As emotional literacy spreads, it has the potential to help people to listen more... to understand their own needs... to explore with others how these needs may be met through changes in the world around them and what contribution they can make to these changes (Antidote, 2003, p.109).

We are social beings; our identity and world view are constructed in our interactions with others (Habermas, 1990). The emotions we feel, manage and respond to are situated within a social context (Ginsberg and Harrington, 1996). Research is increasingly finding that social and emotional learning needs to address issues of context as well as the individual development of knowledge and skill (Greenberg et al, 2003). The challenge here is how to construct, develop and maintain mutually respectful relationships between all stakeholders in the school system. Issues of belief and expectation, role definition, power structures, discourse, personal histories, stress, support and sense of self all interact to determine how someone feels about themselves and others. The more one investigates how 'respect' is put into practice or embodied within the organization of a school the more it becomes apparent that many considerations and potential inconsistencies need to be addressed.

Definitions and meanings

A significant challenge is that of definition - what someone might mean by 'respect'. Despite the definition in the National Framework for Values the meaning of the word 'respect' is not a given. It changes according to history, culture, belief and subjective position. The Collins English Dictionary defines respect as: "An attitude of deference, admiration or esteem". It was not so long ago that 'respect' was accorded to role and position in society with the counter picture of 'respectful' meaning knowing one's place. Respect as deference is illustrated in this quote from the Ramsey report on teacher education (Ramsey, 2000): "Many experienced teachers feel that the authority and respect that they once enjoyed as teachers are now declining" (p. 9). This meaning is still current. The NSW Department of Education and Training Annual Report (1999) outlines initiatives to ensure good discipline and improve attendance at school. These initiatives encourage students to 'respect' authority.

Schools are potentially heavy with 'authority'. Teachers have authority over students, the executive have authority over staff and families may be in awe of teachers and the power that they wield over their children and their children's place in the school. Where there are power differentials those who are not in a position of authority or do not have the status or knowledge to be 'respected' in their own right either accept their subjectivity and position themselves as 'subordinate' acting with 'appropriate deference', or seek respect in ways that might not be recognised by others as legitimate because it is outside of the dominant discourses.

In some contexts respect means being honoured or esteemed: thought worthy by others. The issue here is the criteria for worth: what is construed as valuable? Young teenagers in London use the term 'dissing' when referring to not being respected. Where young people have little chance of being respected for the values of the dominant culture in

achievement, wealth and honour they develop their own criteria. Respect can be gained by possession of coveted material goods, such as designer label clothes and the latest music device. In communities in which I have worked, being seen as 'hard', 'not to be messed with' is what matters. To be messed with is 'dissing' and not to be tolerated by anyone with 'self-respect'. The embodiment of such a definition may include an unwillingness to back down, negotiate, mediate or otherwise be seen to 'lose face'.

Although on the surface these values would be seen as incompatible with those that schools attempt to inculcate in their students, this 'enforced respect' it is still a *modus operandi* where those with undisputed authority see little reason to see someone else's point of view if it is not in their interest to do so. In schools this is borne out by the message: "You will respect me because I have the power here, not because I have earned respect in my relationship with you".

Respect in many documents refers to respecting difference and cultural diversity. This again is a worthy aim, but when seen embedded within a society in which there is little critical analysis of the givens that constitute 'normal', it takes active effort to ensure that this is more than lip service. Education has moved towards a homogeneity in expectations that does not always credit individual differences as valuable and may make little room in practice for respecting diversity. Despite statements to the contrary, the dominant discourse is that respect is to be won by excelling in a certain way, by behaving in a certain way, by holding power and status and in the wider society, by having the goods that demonstrate your worthiness in material advantage. The incongruence and inconsistency between systems means that however much individuals and organisations attempt to embody ethical and respectful practice at the micro and meso strata, in an ecological framework the dominant discourses at the macro system present an inhibiting factor.

Egan (2002) cites respect as a foundation value in basic counselling. In his seminal text *The Skilled Helper*, he begins by acknowledging the difficulty of definition but then goes further than most commentators in attempting to explore respectful practices. These include the exhortation to do no harm, not rush to judgement and not overpower the person's agenda with your own. Respect in this context is accorded as a human right, not awarded in response to power, attainment or quality of character. The rationale is that without being treated with respect there is little possibility that clients will feel safe enough to explore their motivations, feelings and goals in ways that will change their lives. The research on counselling is clear: regardless of therapeutic stance it is the client counsellor relationship that counts for 30% of effectiveness (Lambert, 1992).

The definition of respect used in this paper is intended to link with the construct of emotional literacy and is not the same but closely aligned with the Rogerian principle above (Rogers, 1965). This means exploring respect as an interaction that enables people to feel more positive about themselves and more open to collaborative endeavours. It is where worth and value is communicated in ways which facilitate feelings of acceptance and enhance the ability to contribute. Respect as deference to authority appears to be a one-way street with no reciprocal expectation or bi-directional influence. It is therefore

not included in this paper, being neither consistent with systemic analysis nor a useful way forward to develop good practice.

This paper will now explore perceptions of various stakeholders in the school environment. The studies below illustrate the subjective voices of those positioned differently in school systems to identify how it feels to be a recipient of respectful interactions and the difference this makes to expectations of themselves and others, their motivations, confidence and positive emotionality. This also provides evidence for the utility of a systemic analysis and the power of bi-directional influence.

The studies

The following research projects include data that is relevant to the deconstruction of respect in education although each have a wider brief that is, or will be, published elsewhere. Each is based in a qualitative methodology, exploring processes and meanings for the participants.

The home-school interface for behaviour (Roffey, 2002, 2004) investigated practices that parents/carers considered supportive in their interactions with schools concerning their child's behaviour. An educational psychology service database identified all students where behaviour had been noted as an issue of concern. Their families were invited to participate in the study. 77 questionnaires and 19 semi-structured interviews with families, together two focus groups of professionals working with families provided data. Analysis of this study deconstructs respect from the point of view of parents.

Circle Time is a regular classroom activity designed to increase class cohesion and a supportive climate and develop social and emotional competencies within individuals and groups. It has been developed both in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom where it is a well known intervention (Taylor, 2003). Circle Time was piloted in a primary school in Western Sydney and the implementation process and outcomes evaluated through questionnaire, semi-structured interview and focus groups with teachers, executive and two groups of students. Analysis of this study deconstructs respect from the perspective of primary school students and teachers.

The establishment of emotional literacy in Australian schools study (analysis in progress) investigated the process of establishing emotional literacy in two primary and two high schools in Australia in New South Wales and Victoria. Additional data was gathered from two principals in other primary schools, one public and one catholic. These schools were identified as actively developing good practice in the field of emotional literacy. Data was gathered via questionnaires to staff and semi-structured interviews (some as focus groups). Respect in this study was deconstructed from the perspective of school executives, school counsellors, primary and high school students and teachers.

Findings

Although the analysis here has been categorised under specific headings for clarity these are not distinct entities in the lived experiences of participants but interact with each other to determine an outcome at any given time. The quotations illustrate both respectful interactions – those that make teachers, students and parents feel valued and positive about themselves and others - and a few which illustrate the opposite. In many of these quotations the implications for the construction of positive respectful environments are clear.

Acknowledgement

Greeting

Respect can be demonstrated by simply acknowledging someone's presence:

'Teachers say hi. It makes a difference, coming down to your level. It's more like your friend and you can respect them. But when it was time to work, you worked. If the teacher felt disappointed in you, you didn't want that. (Student)

Teachers also say that it makes a difference to feelings of well-being when colleagues greet them positively. A genuine smile that conveys warmth spreads good will both to the recipient and also to the giver. (Laird & Apostoleris, 1996). Even kindergarten children highlight the importance of greeting as acknowledgement:

I like the circle time game because I get to say hello to someone and they get to say it back.(Student)

Acknowledgement of the Whole Person

Both staff and students feel more accepted when conversation includes issues beyond work related topics. Students commend their teachers for interest in their activities and lives outside of school because it makes them feel both cared for and acknowledged beyond their student role:

Although they are still teachers they ask you how your weekend went, they make it more personal as if they were really interested in you. If they like me, I like them better. (Student)

Such acknowledgement appears to be a validation of the whole person, acknowledging strengths as well as limitations.

There is an understanding that everyone's opinions are valued. (Teacher)

Here every kid is a first rate kid...some people want to talk about how awful kids are but we have addressed that and are very upfront that we do not do that here. (Principal)

Those who do not feel 'pre-judged' have the opportunity to present themselves and their concerns without fear of prejudice or dismissal. This fosters the necessary safety and collaboration to problem solve. This is one of the features of Circle Time:

I think that confidence has grown... the confidence to being able to say what you think, and also that expectation that you listen to what other people say. (Principal)

Stereotyping by contrast is not respectful as it makes assumptions, limits possibilities and may engender a defensive response:

We walked into the study and the head teacher immediately said: 'I'm just so sorry for you and your husband - you've got a real problem child there...' Here was this really bright lad who suddenly had this label... it was a very traumatic experience, very upsetting. (Parent)

Acknowledgment of the positive

This ensures that a deficit or problem does not negate complex personalities. Because it does not label someone into a fixed position it opens up possibilities to generate creative responses:

Even if he had a bad day, she'd always find something good that he'd done which made me feel better. (Parent about her child's teacher)

Although we disapproved of his behaviour we were showing we had faith in him by saying he wasn't a bully. (Parent in collaboration with her son's teacher)

The following approach did not appear to respect the parent as someone with value or her son as a person with possibilities, which minimised the potential for collaboration:

I was too scared to go upstairs and pick him up from his classroom. I used to sit and wait for him in the hall because the teacher would always come and say something negative. (Parent)

A different teacher the following year led to a solution:

She gave him little certificates and made him feel good about himself... and that was what actually worked and it worked from the first week. (Parent)

Acknowledgement of work and effort

Positive acknowledgement of a job well done is not just about the occasional accolade to the few for great works but a regular noticing of daily effort and achievement. This respecting of everyday events fosters a positive sense of self that underpins continued effort and enhances emotional resources to deal with difficulties as they arise:

In our weekly bulletin there is always something saying thank you to someone - not for just the big things. It makes you feel really good. (Teacher)

Thank you notes make me feel valued. (Teacher)

Acknowledgement of feelings

Validation of emotional responses to events is not the same as condoning expressions of those feelings that are hurtful or dangerous. This acknowledgement respects that for the individual the feeling has a subjective meaning and is not dismissed as unnecessary or an over-reaction (Laws & Davies, 2000). As such it is part of being 'heard'.

Acknowledgement of feelings in this way often has implications for the reduction of difficult or distressed behaviour (Roffey, 2004).

We work around feelings diplomatically, taking account of the feelings of the teacher and the student. (Principal)

Acknowledgement of errors and mistakes

This is seen as respectful to others and a way of repairing damaged relationships.

(Saying sorry) needs to happen because not apologising leads to resentment.

(School counsellor)

Well, when you think about it when you've done bad things and you just feel very bad for it and you want to make up for it. (Student about Circle Time)

Acknowledgement of expertise, strengths and competencies

A solution-focused view of an individual (de Shazer, 1985; Durrant, 1994) seeks to explore exceptions to difficulties and competencies within individuals. This respectful practice is the opposite of blame and 'put down' and does not limit discussions to deficits and pathologies that narrow the field of possibility. Acknowledgement of strengths in schools similarly makes people feel valued:

I feel valued and appreciated in the department I work in and this reflects a great deal on my enthusiasm, input and dedication to students and staff in this department. (Teacher)

In the Juniors they were doing something about ships and boats and the teacher said 'get E because he knows all the parts' – he had a really good relationship with that teacher. (Parent of a child with a learning and behavioural difficulty)

Having something to offer that is marginalised, dismissed or simply not elicited does not help in making people feel valued:

Able students get all the praise. And sports. Other activities need a higher focus.

There needs to be something to help less confident students. (Student)

Awareness and taking account of contextual needs and demands

Everyone brings with them the specifics of situations they are currently dealing with. When this is taken into consideration it acknowledges the whole person and promotes better relationships:

I found that helpful, someone who had a sympathetic ear and understood the difficulties of getting children to school on time. It made you more enthusiastic to get them there on time. (Parent)

Inclusion, belonging and participation

Every person here is seen as a valued member of the team. There are no groups, cliques of favourites, everyone is treated equally. (School counsellor)

This is about 'us' and 'our school'. If something is for the benefit of the kids, we'll go with it. (School counsellor)

'All children here are encouraged to share their opinions and concerns. (Teacher)

Listening

Having someone listen to what you have to say demonstrates that you have the right to express an opinion in matters of concern to you and as such is a signifier of respect:

Even if your ideas aren't taken up at least someone has asked you what you think and you've had your say about it. (Teacher)

If you feel you can go into the school and there is that one person who will listen ,you've got the basis for a good foundation. (Parent)

Those who feel unacknowledged, marginalised and disrespected may react to the feelings this engenders which reinforces a negative spiral:

'Most of the time I go up there I'm in a temper because I want to know what's going on. I'm trying to put my own view across and they don't want to listen so I end up screaming and shouting at them. (parent)

Safety

People need to feel emotionally safe to participate:

People can respect you more and they don't laugh at your answers like what you've got to say. (Student about Circle Time)

Valuing difference

This is also about helping people to feel included and taking account of the contexts they bring with them:

Everyone here is valued and equal despite their disability or ability. (Teacher)

Circle time is really good to get the kids in your class to know each other real well.

When you have kids sharing quite happily about when they were coming out of Afghanistan and how they went through the tunnel and stuff like that, the kids are going 'woo'! (Teacher)

Communication.

Being told what is going on is clearly part of respectful practice. Schools which ensure that good information systems are in place minimise confusion about who is doing what so everyone knows what they need to know to work effectively and efficiently. This assists in promoting a positive ethos:

I try and make everything here transparent, all executive meetings are communicated with staff and policies stay in draft as they are constantly being reviewed. (Principal)

I felt very empowered because I knew what was going on. I felt I didn't have all the responsibility - it was shared. (Parent)

No put downs

One of the circle time principles is the ‘no put down’ rule. No one is allowed to name, blame or shame anyone else. Issues may be discussed and naming is acceptable if a positive statement is made about someone but negativity directed at an individual is not permitted:

When there was a put-down ... everyone in the class was sort of shocked and said ‘we don’t talk bad - I can’t believe you said that’ and they all stood up for this other girl. (Teacher)

In one of the primary schools in the Emotional Literacy project the notice ‘This is a No Put Down Zone’ appears everywhere, in all classrooms, staffroom, and principals’ office. This promotes ways of interacting that facilitate safety and well-being:

People’s feelings aren’t hurt here. (Teacher)

When put downs occur the loss of respect is on both sides, and relationships may need to be rebuilt:

This teacher put this girl down – she would never have respect for that teacher from now on. (Student)

Discussion

How discourses ‘position’ the other in an organization will have an impact on whether that person is seen as someone ‘deserving’ of respect or not. Parents who are seen as ‘a nuisance’ or ‘inadequate’ are unlikely to be granted respect whereas those who are seen as ‘supportive’, ‘important’, or ‘with good character’ will be. Similarly students who are positioned with one of the myriad negative labels available are not likely to receive acknowledgment for what they are doing well or the meaning of their behaviour. Teachers who work in autocratic systems find that at best their views and feelings are not acknowledged and at worst they are bullied (Holmes, 2005). High absentee rates result (Bobek, 2002).

Emotionally literate environments, however, position all stakeholders within the community as having value. Respect appears to thrive throughout systems when it is demonstrated within interactions that empower people to participate and enable them to feel more positive about themselves and about others. This includes acknowledgement of individual complexity to validate strengths, competencies, contexts and potential. Respect is where people are invited to participate in what concerns them, are in receipt of communications about what concerns them and actively valued for their contributions: it is where concerns, issues and emotions are validated so that one construction of reality does not dominate and responsibilities are shared.

The executive and senior management of a school can no longer expect to demand respect for their role alone any more than teachers can expect deference from students. A powerful finding of this research here is that respect towards people in positions of power and authority is gained by giving it.

This definition of respect is not weakness. Respect does not mean letting people getting away with bad practice – in fact the opposite. All the principals in the interviews were firm in their belief that good practice in relating to children was good practice at all levels of the organization. Senior executive who put respect high on their list of values are insistent that this happens throughout their school. It is not an option and it applies to all:

We are creating a community that looks after all the people in the community...
When I first came here no-one cared about anybody – it was all about ‘me’. We had to introduce policy, practices and guidelines which would bring about self respect and mutual responsibilities... there was discussion about bullying, respect and how we need to treat others as we want to be treated. (Principal)

This paper has only just touched upon how self-respect is a pre-requisite for giving respect. Some individuals challenge the systems in which they live and work in their struggle to carve out a respect for themselves that is otherwise missing from their lives. If no-one shows you that you are valuable and worthy of respect how will you learn to know this or know how to show it to others? Those in positions of authority have a role to play in examining themselves and their practice to determine how they might be contributing to the issues emanating from their school. Emotionally literate leadership is one of the major challenges for the future (Scott, 2003).

Questions are part of the pedagogy throughout an emotionally literate environment. Taking seriously what people think and feel not only demonstrates respect but also presents opportunities for reflection and discourse, embedding understanding as part of learning.

Oscar Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest* said: “The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out”. Emotional literacy reverses the spiral and puts respect high on the agenda as part of co-constructing an environment in which everyone feels that they are valued members of a caring community.

About the Author

Dr Sue Roffey is a senior lecturer in educational psychology at the University of Western Sydney. She has written widely on issues relating to behaviour in schools and is a founder member of a cooperative to promote social and emotional literacy in Australia. www.emlita.com.

Contact Details

Dr Sue Roffey
Senior Lecturer
Department of Psychology
University of Western Sydney
Locked Bag 1797 Penrith South
NSW 1797 Australia
Email: s.roffey@uws.edu.au or
sue@sueroffey.com
Phone: 02 9960 2523
Mobile: 0409 047672
Fax: 02 9960 2531

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