The Emotional Intelligent Teacher

### Why being in tune with emotions can benefit the teaching and learning process.

Defining teacher qualities have historically evolved around the level of students’ achievements and outcomes as well as the qualifications held by the teacher. Being able to develop and modify curriculum to accommodate different learning styles and multiple intelligences, as well as incorporate the latest technological developments has often been the focus when designing educational models. However, classrooms, either face-to-face or virtual, are not just for transfer and sharing of knowledge, they are often filled with both positive and negative emotions in students and teacher alike. Positive emotions can promote learning and absorbing new and complex content whilst negative emotions can lead to student disengagement and teacher stress. The importance of a teacher’s ability to connect with their students, correctly interpret, assess and manage their emotions as well as their own personal emotions is often overlooked. Nonetheless this forms an integral part for both student success during their study and later in life, and has the ability to reduce stress levels in teachers preventing possible burn out.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) 2.1 million people between the ages of 15-64 were enrolled in formal, non-school study in 2013, of which 18% were at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. Each of these students engaged in some shape or form with a capable and talented teacher to guide them through their learning journey. Defining teacher abilities and qualities have historically evolved around the level of students’ achievements and outcomes as well as the qualifications held by the teacher (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012). Whilst the level of student achievement can present itself in many ways throughout a student’s learning journey, the focus on the importance of student accomplishment generally commences from Grade 3 onwards in the form of standardised annual literacy and numeracy assessments. According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2011) the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test not only provides “valuable data to support good teaching and learning, as well as school improvement” (p. 1) but also “tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life” (p. 1). Annual NAPLAN results allow schools, teachers and students (and their families) to assess student progress and make adjustments in teaching strategies and student learning where required, and NAPLAN results between schools can be compared with “statistically similar schools” (McGaw, cited on ACARA, 2011, p. 1) on the ‘My School’ website. However, are these outcomes real measures of a student’s preparedness for life in the 21st century or have we become so focused on providing facts which are easy to measure instead of inspiring students to develop higher order cognitive skills through questioning those facts with encouragement of their teacher through a positive, supportive relationship and “emotional engagement” (Costa, Heath, Noble, Willis, & Aedy, 2010).

All learning experiences are fundamentally social developments and contain not only cognitive but also emotional features. In this “the social and emotional competencies of the teachers have great impact on the teaching-learning process” (Ergur, 2009, p. 1023). Being emotionally engaged with the teacher, peers and content provides a student with positive emotions in classrooms filled with both positive and negative feelings. However, although teachers can be seen as the vital part in creating positive classrooms for constructive learning and life-long knowledge, they often miss the fundamental knowledge in regards to emotional and social growth in students and themselves. In ‘Optimising our Learning Potential’ Judy Willis (Costa et all, 2010) states that emotional disengagement due to negative interactions with peers and/or teachers is one of the leading causes for students to withdraw from their course in the United States. On the other side, a student who feels safe, secure and connected in the classroom with a sensation of belonging and being emotionally involved will experience mostly positive emotions. Positive emotions aid students with their learning, remembering and understanding and “provide the motivational drive that encourages learners to stretch themselves and to engage in the face of difficulties” (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012, p. 6). A teacher who is emotionally competent and experienced can assists with developing those positive emotions in students and foster student wellbeing and academic performance. However, recognizing, understanding and managing emotions in the form of emotional intelligence are often not part of a teacher’s qualification.

According to Mortiboys (2012) the role of a teacher is threefold; not only do they need to have an in-depth knowledge of the content they deliver, teachers also need to be experts in the various pedagogical learning and teaching methods to be able to establish an inviting and suitable challenging and supported learning environment. The cornerstone supporting these two aspects however is the ability of the teacher to connect with their students, identifying emotional aspects of their learning journey and creating a safe and trusting environment through the use of emotional intelligences. Nevertheless before a teacher can understand a student’s emotions and establish a deeper connection with them, they first need to have a high level of self-awareness as well as self-management of their own emotions and the potential impact those emotions can have on themselves and their students. Although Turner and Stets (as cited in Corcoran & Tormey, n.d., p. 2) stated that “the human brain is not capable of making rational decisions without reference to its emotional processes” western cultures often consider emotions as ”disorganized interruptions of mental activity” (Salovey & Mayer, 2004, p. 2), whilst Corcoran and Tormey (2012, p. 33) describe emotions as “a threat, something which causes us to ‘lose our reason’” and as such “emotions should be controlled and suppressed by reason” (Corcoran & Tormey, n.d. p. 2). However, according to Brackett & Katulak (n.d., p. 4) emotions also “drive attention, which impacts learning, memory, and behavior” and an emotionally intelligent teacher can foster positive social engagement and “create a more stable, supportive, and productive learning environment”.

In 1920, American Psychologist Edward Thorndike set the scene for the emotional intelligence discussion with his term ‘Social Intelligence’ which he described as “the ability to manage and understand people and to act wisely in human relations” (“Emotion”, n.d., p. 306). Fifty years later emotional intelligence was described by Claude Steiner and Paul Perry under the term ‘Emotional Literacy’ which encompassed the ability to understand, manage and control one’s emotions. According to Steiner, to be emotionally literate means that not only do you know “what emotions you and others have, how strong they are, and what causes them” (Steiner, 2003, p. 4), you are also able to express your emotions efficiently and can empathetically relate to the effect they may have on others. In 1983 Howard Gardner touched on this subject with his Multiple Intelligences theory, including emotions in both the interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. John Mayer and Peter Salovey followed this in 1990 with their description of Emotional Intelligence as:

as the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions (Salovey & Mayer, 2004, p. 5).

They later defined this model into the “ability model of emotional intelligence” (Mayer, 2012). For many however, emotional intelligence may be correlated with the books written about this topic by psychologist and science journalist Daniel Goleman. In an era where “intellect is seen as the location of rational thought and, therefore, more trustworthy than emotions” (Mortiboys, 2012, p. 5) Goleman stated the fact that emotional intelligence was as important as intelligence quotient or IQ, leading to a change in how businesses recruit new employees, and the introduction of “social and emotional learning (SEL)” (Goleman, n.d.) in schools across the United States. Goleman’s broader description of emotional intelligence, or Emotional Quotient (EQ), includes five emotional and social domains linking a diverse range of personality traits such as initiative, motivation and teamwork with the emotional intelligence concept even though they are not directly related to either emotions or intelligence (Mayer, 2012).

But why is emotional intelligence so crucial in education? To ensure our students are not only knowledgeable in regards to the content that is delivered but are also ready for life in general, they need to be well equipped with a range of life and social skills, such as being a critical thinker, communicator, collaborator and creator (4Cs), which can be achieved by allowing social and emotional development to occur and through linking social-emotional abilities to everyday life situations during the educational process (Elias, 2003; Matthews, 2006). Elias (2003) also states that “effective, lasting academic and social-emotional learning is built upon caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments” (p. 8). Here students are encouraged to actively participate in problem solving when unfamiliar situations arise and set their own goals with support and guidance from a teacher with high levels of emotional intelligence. In addition, emotionally skilled teachers who are empathetic, have good communication and listening skills, and create a learning environment of trust and worthiness seem to be able to positively affect student behaviour, learning participation and reduce the incidence of students disengaging from the educational system (Corcoran & Tormey, 2012). So, why do high levels of emotional intelligence in a teacher have this effect and what other benefits in the teaching and learning process can be achieved from being in tune with emotions?

As earlier stated, emotions in the classroom can have both a positive and negative impact on a student’s learning. However, they can have the same effect on teachers. To ensure that those emotions are predominantly positive, teachers need to “find ways to make learning intrinsically rewarding. Learning should feel good” (Zull, 2004, p. 70) and both the teacher and the student should become aware of those positive feelings. High levels of emotional intelligence can equip the teacher with the right tools to create an appropriate environment to achieve this goal, through:

* Better interpersonal relationships between the teacher and their students and between students in general. According to Daniel Goleman (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003) emotional intelligence includes the aspects of self-awareness (being aware of one’s own emotions), self-management (knowing how to deal with those emotions), self-motivation (strong drive to learn and to pursue and achieve goals), empathy (recognising emotions in others and the effect they may have). When we engage in social relationships we utilise these aspects.
* Emotionally expressive teachers are able to create an atmosphere of cooperation, trust, authenticity and respect by appropriately sharing some of their inner feelings, motivation, skills and intentions with others as well as learning about themselves through feedback from others as demonstrated in the 'disclosure/feedback model of self-awareness' or the Johari Window created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham.
* Being able to create an environment that stimulates learning, creates curiosity and generates ‘Flow’. According to Csikzentmihalyi (1990, p. 1) “a state of concentration so

focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity”. Innovative practices to maintain a student’s attention span, authentic assessment as well as a constructivist approach of peer learning are all ways which can bring about flow, whilst at the same time ensuring there is an appropriate balance between students’ skill level and the learning challenges they are facing.

* Educational growth and development in students can be achieved by challenging them and allowing them to leave their own individual comfort zone while at the same time providing a supporting environment. However, if there is an imbalance between pressure and support as described in Daloz’s Model of Support and Challenge, students may find themselves not in the “growth or learning zone” but in the “panic zone” (Brown, 2008, pp. 3-4) and withdraw from the course. Providing the right support starts with being able to have that connection between teacher and student to facilitate dialogue in regards to the specific challenges, how they impact on their learning and what strategies can be put in place. Good interpersonal skills as part of well-developed emotional intelligence in the teacher, plays a vital role with this.
* Teachers often find themselves in Daloz’s Retreat area with too many challenges and not enough managerial, administrative and professional development support. It is therefore not surprising that “more than one in four new teachers are suffering from ''emotional exhaustion''” (Marshall, 2013, p. 1). Needing to meet students’ educational expectations and emotional needs, accommodate for their differences in learning styles and intelligences as well as incorporate novel teaching practices such as the use of social media are some of the pressures a teacher can face. The emotionally intelligent teacher is adaptable, can handle change with flexibility and recognises the stressors associated with change and pressure. The teacher has the ability to understand and deal with the emotions those stressors can create in a constructive way as well as maintain positive moods. Thus leading to a reduction in stress reduction or better stress management and the prevention of teacher burn out.

# Conclusion

It has been well established that learning is more than the transfer of knowledge; providing students with subject content only as part of their formal education does prepare them well enough for both life and work in the 21st century. To be an all rounded citizen of the world emotional and social skills are required, as well as being able to set achievable goals, communicate, collaborate and have the ability to problem solve. These skills may come naturally to some but will need to be taught to most. Teachers with high levels of emotional intelligence can create the appropriate environment to foster these skills through their awareness and management of not only students’ emotions but also their own. They create empathetic and trusting learning environments, provide brain friendly teaching and learning activities with the right level of challenges and support, and encourage reflection. It is encouraging that the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2014) has adopted steps to promote social and emotional learning (SEL) from an early age through their Early Years Learning Framework and that ACARA has included personal and social competencies as “important, ‘general capabilities’” (Linke, 2011, p. 9). We can only hope and anticipate that one day these changes will reflect in the abolishment of standardised, a one size fits all, training and assessment.

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