Developing an emotionally literate school

Stuart Boon
University of Leicester

Abstract

“Emotional Literacy” involves students being able to recognise their emotions and those of others and respond to these in appropriate ways. This article will first provide an overview of literature which defines emotional literacy before offering some conclusions about what this term actually encompasses. It will then suggest some ways in which schools can foster more emotionally literate cultures. Developing such cultures in schools might involve a whole school approach devoted to emotionally literate behaviour management, enhancing the position of emotional learning within the school timetable, providing opportunities for circle time and considering ways in which emotional literacy might be developed on the playground too through peer mentoring. The article will then evaluate some of the perceived benefits of developing emotional literacy in schools such as improved behaviour, pupil welfare and examination results, before offering recommendations for professional practice. Although primarily aimed at primary and elementary school teachers, this article is also relevant for professionals working in secondary schools and those interested in affective education.

Keywords: emotional literacy; emotional intelligence; primary schools; affective education; school improvement; circle time; peer mentoring; whole school approach.
Introduction

Developing emotional literacy is now seen as being increasingly important because many schools regard affective education as a vital step if pupils are to learn effectively in other areas of the curriculum (Maslow, 1943; Hartley, 2003). This article will outline what is meant by emotional literacy before identifying and critiquing some of the strategies that leaders in schools might use to ensure their settings become more emotionally literate. These strategies might include: a whole school approach towards developing emotional literacy; positive emotionally literate behaviour management; opportunities for affective education across the school timetable; circle time activities; and peer mentoring on the playground. After this, the potential benefits of developing emotional literacy in schools will be evaluated which might include improvements in the quality of pupils’ behaviour, welfare and examination results. The article concludes by summarising some of the arguments made in the article.

What does it mean to be emotionally literate?

The use of the term emotional literacy in schools is underpinned by theories which broadened more traditional views of intelligence (Kelly et al., 2004). These views suggested that intelligence was something unchangeable and could be measured by various IQ tests which emphasised the importance of ‘reasoning and problem-solving’ (Jordan et al., 2008, p. 97). In the 1980s, however, Howard Gardner proposed that intelligence should have a much broader definition. He argued for a ‘… theory of multiple intelligences’ (Gardner & Hatch, 1989, p. 9) which included ‘…interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences’ (Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008, p. 105).
It was this theory that provided the impetus for further research, revising traditional views of intelligence (Kelly et al., 2004). From this emerged the theory that people may be emotionally intelligent, a term which has been defined in various ways by academics. Some believe emotional intelligence is fixed and unchangeable (Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2008). For example, Mayer et al. (2008, p. 503) propose that people differ in their ‘ability to reason about and use emotions to enhance thought’. The ‘ability model’ (Bracket and Mayer, 2003, p. 1147) of emotional intelligence involves the ‘perception, integration, understanding and management of emotion’ (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p. 166).

Other writers have included a wider range of personal characteristics in their explanations of this concept and argue that emotional intelligence is something that is more malleable (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2008). According to Goleman (2004, p. 84) ‘emotional intelligence… [includes]… self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill’. People can improve their skills in each of these areas with appropriate training (Goleman, 2004). Goleman’s description is the one that most schools use to underpin aspects of emotional literacy (Killick, 2006).

Similar to Goleman, Bar-On (2007) refers to emotionally intelligent individuals as those who deal with everyday challenges and form positive connections with people. However, the concept of emotional intelligence has been widely criticised. This is because it is difficult to quantify, it has similarities with a wide range of human characteristics and there is debate about whether it describes abilities or skills (Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Murphy, 2014). Despite these criticisms, educators have endorsed a concept which identifies the key role that emotional awareness plays in schools under the term emotional literacy (Coppock, 2007).
Despite this, a number of writers have argued that emotional literacy should be distinguished from emotional intelligence (Park, 1999; Haddon et al., 2005). Haddon et al. (2005, p. 6) view ‘… emotional literacy as being not so much an ability but a practice’. Therefore, the term emotional literacy may have been used in schools because emotional intelligence is seen as something unchangeable by academics whose research is underpinned by the ability model (Bracket & Mayer, 2003; Claxton, 2005; Killick, 2006; Mayer et al. 2008). Alternatively, different professions may use different terms to describe the same concept (McGlaughlin, 2008).

Other writers are not so convinced that terms can be easily set apart (Kelly et al., 2004; Humphrey et al., 2007; Qualter et al., 2007; Perry et al., 2008). Humphrey et al. (2007) argue that it has not yet been confirmed that emotional intelligence and emotional literacy are conceptually different. This view is supported by Park (1999, p. 20) who shows that ‘Both… ‘intelligence’, and… ‘literacy’, emphasise the abilities to recognise one’s own feelings, to read the emotional responses of others, and to use these… to develop positive relationships’. In the same vein, Weare (2004, p. 2) proposes that ‘Emotional literacy…. includes the ability to understand, express and manage our own emotions, and respond to the emotions of others’. Again, this corroborates strongly with the previous definitions of emotional intelligence (Claxton, 2005; McLaughlin, 2008). In view of this evidence, it seems as though there may be conceptual overlaps between emotional literacy and emotional intelligence. Due to these similarities, this article will review studies relevant to both terms when considering how to foster an emotionally literate climate in schools.

Creating an emotionally literate climate
Having previously established some of the emotional skills and capabilities schools might be trying to develop in their students, this section will focus on some of the ways in which schools and educational settings might become emotionally literate. The creation of this type of setting seems important given that ‘emotional literacy... is not only about individual capacity... but dependent on the social context in which the individual is located’ (Roffey, 2008, p. 30).

A consistent approach

First it is important that educational leaders adopt a whole school approach towards emotional literacy which all staff, pupils and parents buy into (Weare, 2004; Roffey, 2007; Perry, Lennie & Humphrey, 2008). According to Weare (2004) this needs to be comprehensive, well organised, have clear aims and consider the background of pupils. In particular, this requires a high level of support and direction from leadership teams in schools (Curtis & Norgate, 2007). A whole school approach, driven by dedicated leadership teams, might help to promote a vision whereby all staff, pupils and parents communicate in emotionally literate ways which, in turn, enhances the quality of pupils’ social and emotional welfare (Cushman, 2008). Such approaches have helped to build positive connections between members of school communities even when they have been operating within challenging circumstances (Dean & Galloway, 2008).

Despite this evidence, a study by Coppock (2007) found that there might be obstacles to this approach. These obstacles include the current focus on standards leaving little space for the development of social or emotional skills in the school day and some teachers being disheartened at the prospect of having to execute another initiative that they feel will simply come and go (Coppock,
2007). Perhaps these are issues that might need to be addressed in schools in order to ensure that all staff members endorse emotional literacy (Coppock, 2007).

A further issue that may need to be addressed is the extent to which staff adhere to behavioural policies which promote the use of emotionally literate behaviour management.

Schools’ behavioural policies might include the use of stickers, house and team points and positive comments towards pupils to reinforce positive behaviour (Enzle & Ross, 1978; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 1999). Positive comments might require staff to be emotionally aware of their pupils’ needs particularly as powerful ‘emotions... underlie behavioural outbursts’ (Killick, 2006, p. 85)

Whilst such policies might be adapted to meet the individual needs and requirements of classes, there is generally an expectation that staff in schools will adhere to such policies in order to create a positive learning environment for pupils where individuals communicate in emotionally literate ways with one another. Research has suggested that a consistent approach in this area helps to build positive teacher-pupil connections and ensures that pupils are well motivated and positive about their schools (Harrop & Swinson, 2000; Swinson & Harrop, 2001; Burnett, 2002). It is also important for schools to consider how they might teach students to develop emotional skills.

**Teaching and Learning Emotional Literacy**

In schools this has recently occurred under the banner of SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), online resources and a story book based scheme which uses traditional stories to develop socio-emotional skills (Moffat, 2008) that are all used to teach one-off lessons. However, Mclaughlin (2008) argues that this approach restricts learning because emotional literacy is competing for importance in relation to other subjects across the school. Perhaps curriculum areas such as history
could be used to teach emotional understanding by children studying the psychological impact of war or a subject such as art might communicate children’s feelings (Cowie et al., 2004). This view is further supported by some research where ‘pupils … in science lessons... [developed] their social and emotional skills’ (Matthews, 2004, p. 300). Pupils learnt how to work together effectively and developed their interpersonal skills which helped them to engage more with issues and topics in science. This study did, however, only focus on short term results and it is questionable whether any sustained improvement was evident (Matthews, 2004).

Zeidner et al. (2002) argue that emotional literacy should be embedded across all curriculum areas because, without this approach, its impact will be short-lived. Claxton (2005, p. 31) also states that ‘Wherever possible, do... Emotional... education through the rich resources of the arts and humanities’. This might emphasise the important function that emotional learning plays across a range of traditional subject areas and where a more thematic approach to the curriculum is adopted perhaps in primary or elementary schools (Claxton, 2005). However, Weare (2004) argues that, if a thematic approach is advocated, this needs to be managed so that social and emotional skills are sufficiently covered so leaders in schools ensure that pupils make progress in emotional literacy as they move through the school (Zeidner, Roberts & Matthews; Weare, 2004).

Whether adopting a discrete or thematic approach, circle time could also be drawn upon in order to promote emotional literacy (Mosely, 1996). This may help pupils to become emotionally literate by listening carefully, developing an awareness of the emotions of other children and responding to these in appropriate ways (Mosely, 1993 & 1996; Kelly, 1999; Canney & Byrne, 2006; Killick, 2006). Circle time might also enable some pupils to control ‘emotional impulses, thereby enhancing their
confidence and self-esteem’ (Coppock, 2007, p. 406). Yet, there have to be clear rules in place for it to work where pupils accept the responses of others unconditionally, take turns, value one another’s suggestions and respond sensitively (Mosely, 1993; 1996).

Schools may well become more emotionally literate if this approach is consistently applied. For instance, in one school the interactions between a group of primary school children became more productive following circle time by children engaging in activities which required them to identify and respond to different emotions in appropriate ways (Moss & Wilson, 1998, p. 12). In a different primary setting, children conducted themselves more appropriately following circle time by responding sensitively to comments made by others in the group (Kelly, 1999). However, these two studies only explored one primary school with one group of pupils so it is questionable whether findings have wider relevance (Lown, 2002; Coppock, 2007; Miller & Moran, 2007; Cefai et al., 2014). In fact, Lang (1998) has argued that few studies have assessed the possible advantages of this approach and many teachers argue that circle time is a worthwhile activity by referring to their own experience rather than empirical studies. More rigorous research is needed to understand the exact impact of circle time on emotional literacy (Leach & Lewis, 2013; Cefai et al., 2014).

Schools may also need to deal with the practical implications of circle time. For instance, practitioners need to know how to deal with complex emotional issues arising from it and there needs to be adequate support for them to do so (Lang, 1998). Moreover, groups with fewer children could be trialled for pupils with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties who may find it challenging coping in a larger, whole class situation (Canney & Byrne, 2006). Once these children are more confident, they could then be introduced to circle time with a larger group of learners. Whilst circle
time might work well in the classroom, research also suggests that there is a need for emotionally literate pupils beyond this location, such as in the playground.

At playtimes, pupils’ emotional literacy skills might be enhanced through peer mentoring (Nelson, 2003; Knowles & Parsons, 2009). This is where emotionally literate children are chosen to act as a positive influence for another pupil during unstructured times of the day such as break and lunch times (Pyatt, 2002). Students selected for this role need to respect others, be capable of comprehending their own feelings, form good relationships, be trustworthy and deal with problems competently (Nelson, 2003; Cartwright, 2005). This may well be conducive to the formation of an emotionally literate atmosphere given that ‘Teachers frequently report the school... becomes safer and more caring’ (Cowie & Hutson, 2005, p. 43). It might be productive to coach many children to positively support one another as studies have shown this has a greater influence on creating a positive setting (Houlton et al., 2009).

Some elements of successful programmes include carefully deciding which pupils need support, choosing appropriate mentors and providing training for these, the dedication of teachers involved and resources to support the programme (Cartwright, 2005; Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Houlton et al., 2009). There is evidence that children being mentored become more emotionally literate as a result of being paired with someone trustworthy and sensible. For example, children being mentored feel more secure as a result of being paired with a responsible citizen, are able to communicate their emotional concerns to a trusted partner, improve their friendships with other children and develop a range of interpersonal skills (Charlton & David, 1997; Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Knowles & Parsons, 2009).
Moreover, there are benefits for pupils mentoring as they take control for themselves, can handle social situations more effectively and become more tolerant and empathetic (Dearden, 1998; Nelson, 2003; Cowie & Hutson, 2005). Despite these findings, research has shown that sometimes this approach fails because teachers place too much emphasis on mentoring to improve the behaviour of pupils (Baginsky, 2004). Teachers also need to be involved in the creation of programmes for them to succeed and, where this has been absent, mentoring has been unsuccessful (Baginsky, 2004). If peer mentoring is to help schools become emotionally literate, mentors need adequate support to meet the needs of peers who they are paired with who may have a variety of emotional needs (Baginsky, 2004; Cartwright, 2005). Having considered some of the ways in which schools might become emotionally literate, the next part of the article will evaluate the benefits of this.

**Evaluating the potential benefits: behaviour, welfare and standards**

A number of studies have pointed out that pupil behaviour and conduct might improve as a result of schools becoming emotionally literate (Cherniss *et al.*, 2006; Killick, 2006). For instance, studies have shown that pupils are less violent, more sociable and resolve problems more easily when they acquire emotional skills (Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007; Qualter *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, research in one setting found that ‘higher levels of emotional literacy... were... associated with lower levels of... problem behaviours’ (Liau *et al.*, 2003, p. 54). Another study, focusing on a group of year five pupils, found a link between emotionally literate children and their capacity to take charge of their own feelings and communicate these effectively (Kelly *et al.*, 2004). In addition, a study focusing on younger children, found that guiding children to develop emotional literacy helped them to improve the quality of their learning behaviours (Curtis & Norgate, 2007). A different study, focusing on
children in Key Stage Two (seven to eleven year olds), concluded that children with greater emotional skills were viewed by themselves and others as being more supportive, compassionate and competent at forming relationships (Mavroveli et al., 2009). Emotional literacy in this study, however, was quantified by using ‘the construct of trait EI’ (Mavroveli et al, 2009, p. 268) which has an association with characteristics, such as being sociable, rather than aptitude (Warwick et al., 2010).

By contrast, it has been argued that ‘EI is best examined within the domain of intelligence’ (Warwick et al., 2010, p. 66). According to Humphrey et al. (2007) this leads to different conclusions dependent upon the theoretical framework adopted by the researcher. Therefore, there does seem to be a link between emotionally literate children and improved behaviour although this is sometimes measured in different ways using different constructs (Mavroveli et al., 2009).

There is also evidence suggesting a link exists between emotionally literate schools and pupils’ welfare (Cowie et al., 2004; Humphrey et al., 2007). According to Perry et al., (2008, p. 28) ‘Examples of the useful preventative qualities of improved emotional literacy abound’. Indeed, studies have shown how greater socio-emotional skills can offset depression, reduce the likelihood that children engage in unhealthy habits such as smoking and criminal activity, and avert mental health problems (Trinidad & Johnson, 2002; Haddon et al., 2005; Coppock, 2007; Humphrey et al., 2007). Research relevant to primary schools found that a programme designed to support aspects of emotional literacy in pupils was successful in enhancing ‘children’s... emotional well-being from Reception to Year 2’ (Curtis & Norgate, 2007, p. 43). Moreover, these results were linked with ‘the Every Child Matters outcomes... of being mentally and emotionally healthy’ (Curtis & Norgate, 2007, p. 43). In addition, in this area, there have been long-term studies conducted, showing a connection between the capacity of pupils to cope with their feelings and a decline ‘in... depressive symptoms in children...
with special educational needs’ (Humphreys et al., 2007, p. 244). McGlashlin (2008) also argues that studies have identified that welfare is linked to pupils having positive relationships with adults.

Finally, researchers have suggested that a primary school’s test results might improve as a result of becoming emotionally literate (Goleman, 2004; Qualter et al., 2007). Indeed, Weare (2004) and Sharp (2000) argue that there is a relationship between the two. Nevertheless, Park (2000) believes that people will remain doubtful that a correlation exists between emotionally literate settings and test results, until this is investigated more scientifically. There are studies which show that aspects of emotional literacy enhance achievement but these are mainly in secondary schools (Qualter et al., 2007). For instance, emotional literacy in one study was found to help improve literacy achievement at Key Stage Four (Petrides et al., 2004). Despite such findings, Humphreys et al. (2007) argue that a clear relationship is yet to be confirmed. This is because studies have come to different conclusions regarding the role that emotional literacy plays in forecasting attainment (Humphreys et al., 2007). Perry et al., (2008, p. 28) claim that ‘the research base for supporting... claims for academic performance... is inconsistent at best’. Similarly, Murphy (2014) asserts that many arguments trying to prove this connection are unsubstantiated. What is more, Zeidner et al. (2002) argue that studies exploring this are unreliable, do not assess the long-term results and are inadequately evaluated. This view is echoed by Qualter et al. (2007) who contest that, in some studies exploring this link, factors such as aptitude or a person’s background have not been considered, making conclusions untrustworthy. Having critiqued some of the potential benefits of developing emotionally literate schools and pupils, it is now time to draw some conclusions for professional practice.

Summary
This article has explored some of the ways schools might become emotionally literate. First, it has been argued that the meaning of emotional literacy is unclear due to its resemblance to emotional intelligence. From the outset, this article adopted the view that, whilst there might be subtle differences, these two concepts cannot be separated without problems (Park, 1999; Weare, 2004; Humphrey et al., 2007). Therefore, it would perhaps be more sensible for schools to develop characteristics in pupils that arguably come under both concepts such as describing and responding to feelings appropriately (Haddon et al., 2005). It must be stressed that this article has not discussed all the ways in which schools can become emotionally literate. It has focused on several barriers which need to be overcome in order for emotional literacy to form part of a school’s culture.

In particular, this article has suggested that schools will only have emotionally literate children if their educators support a positive whole school approach (Roffey, 2007). This approach needs to be all encompassing, evident in behaviour management across the school and in the teaching of a wider range of traditional subjects where opportunities for emotional learning are grasped (Cowie et al., 2004; Carnwell & Baker, 2007; McGlaughlin, 2008). Within this approach, circle time could be used to deliver aspects of the curriculum which might help to improve pupils’ emotional literacy skills (Kelly, 1999). Yet, it has been argued that research on the worth of circle time is still developing and teachers need to be careful about drawing firm conclusions before further studies are carried out (Lown, 2002; Coppock, 2007; Miller & Moran, 2007; Cefai et al., 2014). Finally, in order for emotional literacy to pervade all aspects of school life, a peer mentoring scheme might be implemented, again with the support of dedicated teachers who are willing to oversee it (Nelson, 2003; Knowles & Parsons, 2009). This would involve children, with strong emotional skills, mentoring peers who are yet to develop a full range of emotional skills (Cartwright, 2005; Houlton...
The final section of this article has evaluated some of the perceived advantages arising from becoming an emotionally literate school. Research has indicated that schools might see benefits in pupils’ behaviour and welfare resulting from a focus on emotional literacy (Trinidad & Johnson, 2002; Curtis & Norgate, 2007; Humphrey et al., 2007; Mavroveli et al, 2009). However, studies exploring the link between emotional literacy and attainment have been less conclusive. Here, there is a lack of agreement over the role that emotional literacy plays in gauging children’s future attainment so schools should be cautious about drawing firm conclusions (Zeidner et al., 2002; Perry et al., 2008).

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