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The other kind of smart

Is it time for schools to try to boost kids' emotional intelligence?

By Drake Bennett | April 5, 2009

FOR MOST OF us, what we were taught in school and what we remember from our school years are two different things. We sat through uncountable hours of lessons about denominators and organelles, about precipitates and dangling participles, about Boo Radley and Shays' Rebellion, and yet the memories that sneak up on us today are more likely to be the humiliations suffered on the school bus or the awkward moments from a pubertal romance, the triumph of a deftly parried insult or the sheltering solidarity we felt in a now long-dispersed clique.

Much of what we learn about social life, in other words, we learn in school. The learning process is a fumbling and painful one, administered not by teachers but through schoolyard intrigues and emotional outbursts. And in this part of our education, we are largely on our own. While some people - Franklin Delano Roosevelt was one, Ronald Reagan another - seem born with a gift for emotional perception, the rest of us muddle through as we can. School is set up for one kind of learning, but when it comes to emotional matters, the assumption has always been that these are instincts we have to develop for ourselves.

Today, however, a number of educators and psychologists are arguing that, actually, we don't. What they call "social and emotional knowledge" - the ability to read other people, manage our own emotions, and thereby master social situations - doesn't have to be imparted solely through the cut and thrust of lived life. It can be taught, they say, just like trigonometry or French grammar. Psychologists are designing curricula that aim, step by step, to build up students' emotional knowledge: a typical teaching unit might include a role-playing exercise, or a set of diagrams breaking down the components of different facial expressions, or, in older children, a discussion of the subtle differences between disgust and contempt.

And while the basic idea that school should help refine social skills is not a new one, the proponents of social and emotional literacy programs are armed and emboldened by promising new findings that suggest just how teachable these skills are. With a little training, studies show, grade-schoolers can dramatically improve how accurately they read emotions in others' faces, how well they head off impending tantrums - even how empathetic they are toward classmates.

Education officials are starting to take notice. Around 10 percent of American grade school and high school students now go through some form of social and emotional learning curriculum, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a Chicago-based emotional learning research organization. A handful of states have instituted emotional learning guidelines for their public schools - the most comprehensive is Illinois's, which sets "self-management," "social awareness," and "interpersonal skills" benchmarks, among others, for kids at each grade level.

The movement has been fed by a confluence of factors. Parents and school administrators are increasingly worried about the disruptive effects of bullying and other antisocial behaviors in schools. At the same time, cognitive scientists are emphasizing the vital role emotions play in rational thought.

Supporters point to a growing collection of studies showing the benefits of emotional learning programs in everything from test scores to lowered anxiety

levels and rates of drug use. But the ultimate goal is something larger: a redefinition of what school is meant to teach, and what sort of knowledge we value. What emotional literacy campaigners are arguing is that the problems of the American school system won't be solved by getting kids reading sooner or ensuring that they can find Alaska on a map - they need to better understand what drives them and others.

"This is not meant to be part of the school mental health plan, but part of the regular instructional plan," says Mary Utne O'Brien, a research professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and an executive at CASEL. "It's about more than making school nice; it's specific skills, just like what you're doing in language or math."

The champions of emotional learning claim an intellectual pedigree stretching back to Aristotle, who described emotional control and understanding as vital virtues. Writing in the early 20th century, the philosopher and influential education reformer John Dewey fleshed out this idea, insisting that schools should impart not just information but habits of mind that would ensure that graduates were active participants in a democratic society. Educational reformers in the intervening decades have echoed Dewey's arguments.

Still, these ideas have had a hard time finding purchase in the traditional "reading, writing, and arithmetic" curriculum, especially as standardized tests on traditional topics have come to determine more and more of how students and their schools are judged.

Today's emotional education movement, however, is energized by something new: a surge of studies suggesting that "softer" knowledge like social and emotional skills can be analyzed and taught in the same way that math and critical thinking can be.

The emotional knowledge research field arose in the early 1990s with the work of the psychologists John Mayer, of the University of New Hampshire, and Peter Salovey of Yale. Mayer and Salovey weren't interested in emotional knowledge per se, but emotional intelligence: people's ability to process new emotional information (a sort of emotional IQ). But, according to Mayer, their interest grew out of earlier research exposing some of the mechanics by which emotions guide us and, at times, give us away - work by the neurologist Antonio Damasio, for example, showed how people rendered emotionless by brain damage became not more but less rational in many ways. Also influential was psychologist Paul Ekman, who developed an exhaustive taxonomy of what he called "micro-expressions," tiny, inadvertent facial movements that betray our true emotions. (The current TV crime drama "Lie to Me" is inspired by Ekman's work.)

In Ekman's work in particular, seemingly innate social skills were being broken down into the kind of units that could be studied, and taught - Ekman began offering courses in how to spot and interpret micro-expressions.

What really transformed the field, however, was the 1995 publication of the runaway bestseller "Emotional Intelligence," by the psychologist and journalist Daniel Goleman. In the book, Goleman drew on Mayer and Salovey's work but also made some sweeping arguments of his own. The book was written for a popular audience, and emotional intelligence researchers are careful to distance themselves from some of its more dramatic claims. But its popularity fueled interest among educators, and the sometimes seat-of-the-pants emotional education efforts they embarked on provided ample research fodder for curious psychologists.

In recent years, the results have started to come in, and they suggest that emotional knowledge can indeed be learned in the classroom. Emory University psychologist Stephen Nowicki has found that interventions can teach kids to read faces better. Mark Greenberg of Penn State has found that emotional learning classes can make kids better at controlling themselves when upset. Researchers looking at a curriculum called the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program found that such classes also made children less likely to falsely misread intent - in particular less likely to assume hostility in ambiguous social situations.

"The extent to which this is now research-based is new," says Larry Dieringer, the executive director of the Educators for Social Responsibility, a Cambridge-based education-reform research organization. "The accumulation of evidence has been both basic research about brain development and evidence that comes from the evaluation of social and emotional programs."

Among the most highly regarded of the curricula that both fed and fed off that research is one created by Marc Brackett, the deputy director of the Yale University's health, emotion and behavior laboratory. His program is dubbed RULER (for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions) and Brackett has trained more than 25,000 teachers in it.

"People are just not exposed to this information because it hasn't been valued in our society," Brackett argues. "I can show that people can become better at it."

The RULER curriculum is tailored to different age groups, but in general it involves dozens of sessions: workshops in which students discuss feelings they are having or interview each other about their emotions, role-playing exercises in which they act out different emotions or are presented with emotionally charged situations, then have to work through how to defuse them. There is an emphasis on learning a richer vocabulary to describe emotions, the idea being that students better able to express how they feel will be both more conscious of their feelings and less likely to be misunderstood by others. And there are Ekman-like courses in basic facial expression recognition - many kids, Brackett says, confuse surprise and fear.

One of the central tools of Brackett's system is something he calls the "mood meter," a 2-by-2 chart on which kids can plot their subjective state along with their energy level. Brackett argues that doing so allows kids to better understand what they're feeling and even why. High energy and positive is excited, low energy and positive is relaxed; low energy and negative is sad or depressed, high energy and negative is agitated or angry. A more fine-grained, systematic understanding about what emotions are, Brackett argues, is a key step in learning how to anticipate and control them.

The Obama administration has made clear that it plans to use the tens of billions of stimulus dollars it is injecting into the nation's schools as leverage to demand reform. Much of the administration's agenda has yet to be spelled out, but there is a sense in the education world that fundamental changes could result. And while the administration has yet to mention emotional learning, champions of the idea have taken heart at smaller signals of support: California congressman George Miller, for example, chair of the House Education Committee, has expressed interest in the idea of using federal money to help expand emotional learning programs.

With the administration's much-touted affection for data-driven decision-making, emotional learning supporters believe their growing bundle of research results will only help their cause. Several recent studies have linked social and emotional learning programs to a variety of positive outcomes: better grades, fewer fights, less drug use, and the ability to form more lasting personal relationships.

Still, there are psychologists who argue that it's still very early - after all, general intelligence has been a topic of debate for more than a century - and that teaching emotional intelligence comes with its own risks. In "What We Know About Emotional Intelligence," a book due out this month, the psychologists Moshe Zeidner, Gerald Matthews, and Richard Roberts point out that there's little research demonstrating how emotional learning programs work. And since many programs combine emotional learning with things like antibullying and antiviolence workshops, it's hard to tease out the effect of the emotional curriculum alone.

These critics also raise the question of whether a classroom full of emotionally aware kids might also be a class of adroit emotional intriguers. "If you know how to understand and manipulate other people's emotions, it can turn into something Machiavellian," says Zeidner, director of the center for interdisciplinary research on emotions at Israel's University of Haifa.

Other critics wonder whether reducing social and emotional life to a series of workshops and tests, where some emotions are right and others wrong, risks creating a sort of emotional conformism, the opposite of the vigorous taste for dissent that John Dewey wanted to inculcate.

Supporters of the programs dismiss these concerns as unfounded - the best programs, they argue, are about perceiving and managing emotions, not stifling them. But at the same time, they point out, uniformity runs both ways. Part of the appeal of emotional learning curricula is that they promise to make up for the fact that some kids come armed with a well-developed social sense and all the benefits it confers, and some do not.

"The 'aha' of this field is that it doesn't have to be the luck of the draw - coming up in a family that has it together or naturally being a people person or a self-aware person," says O'Brien, of CASEL. "It's that you can teach these skills to everyone."

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